Fiction

## UNIVERSAL MAN/ 3. Then a Soldier

In this final installment, as light and darkness battle around him, a former high school English teacher endures personal tragedy and loss, isolation, prison, and torture. He finds friends in unusual places. Through all this he emerges as a leader in a nation swelling toward civil war.

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

—from ***As You Like It***
by William Shakespeare

Chaotic Terrain Press
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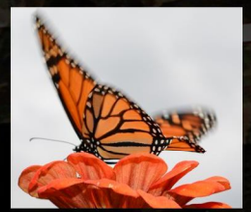

UNIVERSAL MAN/Then a Soldier HUNT

CT

# UNIVERSAL MAN
*a novel*

part three

# Then a Soldier

Meredith Eugene Hunt

LEAU WOOD SOISSONS ST MIHIEL BLANC
WORLD WAR

# UNIVERSAL MAN

A novel in three volumes

Part Three

# Then a Soldier

**Meredith Eugene Hunt**

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Asheville

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*This is a work of fiction.*

Cover photo is the U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington, VA.
All photos by the author unless otherwise indicated.

**ISBN** 978-0-9845111-8-1

Printed in the United States of America
3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

**Fort Sumter, S.C.**
April 12, 1861, 3:20 a.m.

By authority of Brigadier-General Beauregard, commanding the Provisional Forces of the Confederate States, we have the honor to notify you that he will open the fire of his batteries on Fort Sumter in one hour from this time.

We have the honor to be, very respectfully,
Your obedient servants,

***James Chestnut, Jr.***
Aide-de-Camp

***Stephen D. Lee,***
Captain S.C. Army and Aide-de-Camp

## A synopsis of part two, *The Chinook Assembly*

When Beth Telford dies from abortion complications, Tommy withdraws into fantasies and acquires a sniper rifle to kill Dr. Ponder. Perched in a church tower with his rifle, Tommy waits for Ponder; but that morning Ponder is arrested by mysterious people who make it appear that he fled to Canada.

Stan and Mindy draw closer. When the next summer arrives, Stan proposes marriage at the Oregon coast and Mindy accepts.

Tommy has hit a repressed memory—his parents aborting a younger sibling in Salt Lake City. Tommy is frustrated that Ponder is out of his reach. When he shoots an abortionist in Salt Lake City, the press attributes the act to an "anti-abortion zealot" and Tommy accepts the role. He fades from sight.

Time passes. Mindy's father, Dr. Eberhardt Sterne, recruits Stan into the Chinook Assembly, a secret international group that is committed to restoring the "true" government of the United States. One aspect of their role is arresting abortion doctors and incarcerating them in Chile, South America, and this they had done to Dr. Mark Ponder, thus saving his life from a sniper's bullet. Stan's job is to keep Mindy from knowing about the organization, but she has always suspected its existence and learns about it for certain on a family vacation in the Czech Republic when the corrupt U.S. Senator "M" is abducted by the Assembly.

Tommy, now an uncatchable itinerant assassin dubbed "Octopus," is stirring up the Government in Power (GiP), making it hard for the Chinook Assembly to conduct operations. During a family camping trip at Mt. St. Helens, Mindy is kidnapped by brigands and can't be found. In deep grief, Stan identifies with Tommy's loss and wants to find him, despite the danger. While Stan is sunning himself near a Salt Lake abortion site—a GiP trap for Octopus—he invites an old black woman to tea. In the kitchen of the house where Stan is staying, she suddenly speaks in Tommy's voice. It is Tommy. Stan tries to convince him to quit his killing crusade and come with him to Portland. Tommy says: "If I will go with you, I'll return tomorrow." Tommy reverts into the old woman and leaves.

Stan wonders who is watching them.

*Night. I walk through city streets crammed with people. Everyone exhibits bizarre behavior—weird, violent dances accompanied by chanting and drum beating. I have no memory of who I am, and I have no business or job. People wander the streets between the buildings. A child—a girl with blonde hair—comes up from the crowd and says "Daddy?" Another bizarre behavior, and I leave her behind. I come to a barbed-wire fence. People on my side are trying to hand a child over the fence. On the other side is another group of people. Some of these are trying to hand a different child over the fence to our side. Behind them, a group pleads. As I listen, I begin to understand. Our side is for mental defectives. People in the rational world are trying to escape into our city, because the government gives us food. People in the background warn that the government drugs our food—to wipe our memories and destroy brain functioning. The fence is easy to climb over. I walk away. The fence is frightening.*

*Later, the girl with blonde hair comes up to me again and cries "Daddy," and I take her hand. I become disgusted with it all and begin urging people to repent from their selfishness. I am amazed at the words flowing from my mouth. A person calls me a preacher. An inkling of a thought emerges: I have been an enemy of the state, imprisoned in this city.*

*The scene changes and I am in a meeting of inmates. I have stopped eating and my memory is restored, but I pretend that the drugs are working. The meeting is a planning board. I begin to speak with the government leaders about the terrible conditions in the city, and when the officials step away, one of my compatriots puts his hand over my mouth. He says I must not show that I understand the truth, because I am to be a leader of a revolution to overthrow the city. I leave and walk up a crowded stairwell.*

**–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons**

## Chapter 21
# Malcolm Williams

Malcolm Williams was watching . . .

He walked along the dark lakeshore, his mind uneasy. The November night was cool. Candor in an FBI agent might be harmful to one's career, he thought. *It might be harmful to our family, as well. But I need a record, an unofficial record of what I've found, of what I'm finding. Just in case it's needed to convince someone.* That last thought settled the argument for the present, and Malcolm followed the illuminated path in front of his flashlight up through the neighborhood to his house.

"Is that you?" his wife called when he let himself in.

"Of course, my dear," he said as he came into their bedroom.

She rose from her writing desk and gave him a hug.

"I'll be up for awhile," he said. "You go to bed, if you want."

"Okay. You still have work?"

"Tonight I do."

Malcolm descended into his basement and turned on a light at the workbench. This is where he kept his personal computer and cleaned his service weapon. He scooted up a padded stool, lit a rare cigar for him, started a reliable smoke rolling, set the cigar onto the edge of an ashtray, and picked up a thin recording device. He arranged scraps of notes, puffed once and twice more on the cigar, put it down, and began talking.

"My months as a young man in the Iraq war fitted my nature and fed my mind with thoughts of more adventure. After my active term in the Army and college graduation, I worked in my dad's accounting firm and continued my military dream by signing with the Reserves, eventually achieving the rank of Major. But I never returned to the Middle East. My job in the FBI eventually became more important to the government than my military expertise.

"I had joined the FBI as a support accountant. Because much of the bureau's work dealt with fraud, embezzlement, and money crime, it kept a battery of money counters, and I was one of them. It was boring, and in two months I reapplied to become a Special Agent, and I accepted a transfer into the Civil Rights Program—the only opening available here in the Portland area. I loved the sixteen-week training period in Quantico, which was a change from bookkeeping that had been interspersed with the too-rare weekend soldiering in the Reserves.

"I hated my first assignments in the Civil Rights department. During my veteran-preference probationary period, there was not much work of consequence. Under the guidance of an experienced agent, I investigated accusations made against government entities that they used 'color of law,' either by force, or through misconduct, to discriminate. Or I pursued hate-crime leads and monitored sundry individuals and attended routine task force meetings—and nothing resulted in interesting indictments. What I really wanted was to work within the domestic Antiterrorism Program, but I wasn't sure I wanted to move my family to a different part of the country.

"Upon expressing my discontent to my supervisor, Ms. Tam Nguyen, she said I would surely despise the alternative, which was to add to my present duties. I would have to follow leads on the rare bombing or more common acts of 'intimidation' that would interfere with the operation of abortion businesses. The need arose because of an incident when someone broke a window in Vancouver. The FBI wouldn't be investigating this event—local law enforcement was quite qualified, but since such incidents appeared to be on the rise after an extended lull, the federal government was taking a renewed role in the protection of clinics in the Portland vicinity.

"I realized early on that the assignment to monitor abortion attacks was given for pacifying certain people. There was law, I learned, making interference with abortion a federal matter, and they—the abortion-choice groups—wanted prosecutions. They wanted convictions . . ."

Malcolm paused as he grimaced at the incongruous aspects of the law—The Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, or FACE—as applied. Shooting an abortion doctor, for example,

was criminal not because someone had been wrongfully killed, but because it "interfered" with his access to the building.

He continued. "I agreed to the added duties because they were akin to my personal interest in fighting terrorism. Politically, abortion-choice activists considered any interference to be terrorism, but there had been no true anti-choice terrorists in the Portland area. Unless one considers these to be terrorists: a defunct anti-abortion publication that justified homicide, a caller leaving threats with an abortion clinic's answering service, a woman who smashed a clinic escort's camera, another woman who shot at the walls of the abortion clinic at night, and of course the handfuls of zealous protestors in the region."

Malcolm paused again. And then there was Dr. Mark Ponder, who practiced abortion in Vancouver and at a clinic not owned by him in Portland. *How much should I say about what I think of him?* He went on.

"My first initiative, approved by the Assistant Special Agent in Charge in Portland, was to establish a working relationship with the FBI's field office in Vancouver. Vancouver and Portland, being within Washington and Oregon, respectively, came under different jurisdictions, but there was no reason why the offices could not coordinate. I also facilitated similar coordination with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

"My training and habit prepared me to keep personal opinions to myself. Ponder's act was the strangest in the whole circus. Nevertheless, I kept my mouth shut and my face blank while I listened to his half paranoid fears. On my first contact with him, I advised him on the FBI's suggested security protocols. The doctor gave me cold chills; but in spite of my repugnance, I was professional. No one can fault me on this.

"I've always felt that my personality was a conflicting mixture of impatience with tedium and a determination to solve impossible problems. I usually treat my job in a perfunctory manner, and when I return to my wife and two young daughters at our home, I usually forget about it until the morning commute. But some nights while I lie awake in bed, I explore for answers, develop theories, and assemble isolated evidences into cohesive patterns. This mental labor and what some call my taciturn

manner, and not my organizational and communication skills, are probably what make me a decent FBI agent.

"Upon the disappearance of Ponder and the simultaneous, exceedingly strange murder of Talus Schenk in mid-December, of . . . of the year . . . only months after I began the abortion-related violence assignment, my FBI work at last became interesting. Schenk's death came under the purview of FACE law. I didn't conduct interviews following the murder, but I participated in the financial history analysis of Dr. Ponder and discovered that Ponder had made large payments preceding a sudden unexplainable flush of money for Schenk, and the amounts were roughly similar. This was a mystery for which I have only guesses. Blackmail, for one.

"Ponder qualified as the unofficial suspect for the murder of Schenk, but the evidence was indirect. There were no fingerprints on Ponder's knife. If Ponder had killed Schenk, wouldn't he have taken his knife with him? In any case, Ponder had ceased to exist in a world known to the FBI. He had fled to Canada, and from there to anywhere in the world, without leaving a trace. This, too, was a mystery for which no normal explanation sufficed. By the sequence and timing, it *seemed* that Ponder killed Schenk and ran. But the random location of the murder suggested it was a killing of opportunity or passion, and Ponder's leave-taking had not been planned far in advance. Ponder may have withdrawn the cash intending to give it to Schenk on the vacant lot, and things could have gone bad, but I think that scenario is unlikely. I discovered that Ponder, apparently as an afterthought, had emptied his bank accounts electronically during a stop midway en route to Canada and had the funds transferred overseas.

"Ponder's wife had no clue as to why he left. Her statements showed she knew about his infidelities, but there had been no unusual tension between them, only formal distance. Mrs. Ponder coexisted with him, endured him, and loved him the best she could, but she was content with her activities. Unknown to Ponder, she had a boyfriend who was discreet to the degree of being unimpeachable to all—except for those of us whose business it is to unearth secrets. Chief among the riddles was that Ponder, who had paid obsessive attention to his corporation,

should drive off without providing for its disposition. Its monetary value was substantial.

"After a period of shock about the disappearance . . . after her shock, Mrs. Ponder, being named the only other owner of the medical corporation, assumed proprietorship—but with visible distaste for the act of fetal removal. She found another doctor whom she paid well, and afterwards she communicated only with the business manager, she said. The facility provided income, and she wished to give it no further thought.

"Contrary to the dominant thinking in the FBI, I felt certain that Ponder did not kill Schenk. There was something false about Ponder's disappearance—some sleight-of-hand. Ponder is gone for the present, but for all I know he might pop from a secret pocket and cry 'Fooled you!' To my frustration, my colleagues fixed on simple conclusions, and this is why, once I tentatively expressed my doubts and they were rejected, I never brought them up again. On my own, I worked to invent an alternate theory, but there was none to account for the facts, none to give meaning to the facts. I was certain that the answer was right before me, but I hadn't grasped a concept to enable me to understand it. In short, I hit a wall.

"As in any creative or scientific process, I know that answers often come from exploring divergent fields. When Agent Nguyen asked me to infiltrate the local anti-abortion group, which amounted to a degrading of prestige from my then current work, I jumped at the chance. Well . . . I jumped at it after a lengthy family discussion of risks and costs. If I uncovered serious illegal activity, I might have to testify in court and enter a witness protection program—along with my family. But the risks seemed minimal compared to the benefits. Being on the street, my work would be personally engaging and pay more, though it regrettably meant time away from my family—because I would have to attend anti-abortion events.

"Infiltration was remarkably easy. Schenk and Ponder were the only contacts I had made during the earlier phase, and since they were both gone, and no one local knew me, I was free to create my personage. I kept my first name. I began by writing an anti-abortion letter to the editor of the Vancouver newspaper and followed with a modest monetary contribution to the group.

Within a few weeks, I joined the protestors on the sidewalk and was speaking with the leaders on a first-name basis. They were gullible in regard to accepting me, but not foolish, as I had supposed. Their talk was candid and passionate, not exactly guarded, but always circumspect, as if they knew someone from outside the circle might be listening. The leader, a woman named Maria, said to me once, 'I welcome infiltrators and spies, if we have any, because they would be the hardest workers.' I studied and adopted the protestors' belief system to be as convincing as possible, and I was better able to articulate their dogma than they were."

Here Malcolm paused the recording device. He couldn't say on any record that the odd thing was that their dogma had begun to make sense within its own framework. Their reasoning on human life and personhood was faultless. While Malcolm's nominal abortion-choice beliefs weakened and he became friends with the activists, he determined this would not hinder him in his duties. He picked up the cigar, but it had grown cold.

He resumed his recording.

"During this time, the abortion clinic experienced no violence, but there seemed to be a barrage of petty harassments against it—superglue in locks, red graffiti—none of which we could pin to the protestors. The abortion people were convinced it was them. We didn't know. As I said at a task force meeting, 'Either they are ingenious and can get away with this stuff, or they are as they appear—innocent as doves.'

"Then sniper attacks began around the country and continued over the course of two and a half years. Never happened in my territory, but I studied them, not only to augment my work, but because researching became a hobby. I put this information into the mixture that remained a jumble, still not forming a picture, like a jigsaw puzzle without the box as a guide, except the puzzle grew larger and larger. The killer, or killers, remained anonymous. There were no notes of justification or phone calls of warning. Over this period, because of the extensive news coverage of the killings, the country became tense and jittery. If there was only one killer, he was brilliant, virtually unstoppable, and a complete enigma. It was as if he didn't exist except for his actions. A hate-group monitoring expert tagged him 'Octopus'

because he had many assault methods, could change colors in a twinkling, and hide in tight places. The name stuck, and I disliked it because it was unhelpful. I knew there was a truer picture. As I listened to the protestors, I seldom needed to ask questions. They were guileless, talking freely among themselves about the shootings. This all was treading water—I made no progress against the current. I needed more information and an organizing idea.

"During this period, the protestors reminded me of the young man who kicked out a window of the abortion building prior to the death of Talus Schenk and Ponder riding into the sunset—into the Northern Lights. I began thinking about this person. What was his motive for breaking the window? A former employee? A boyfriend of a girl inside? The clinic's records had vanished, it seemed—*were lost,* according to Barbara Ponder. Abortion personnel would admit to no unusual occurrences inside on the day the window was broken. I watched the security tapes over and over. The unknown attacker who kicked Schenk in the stomach introduced another whodunit in a family of whodunits. He could have been Schenk's murderer.

"I pored over the police reports on Schenk's death. Here was an oddity: a false confession by a diagnosed schizophrenic, a Dr. Telford, who is a retired professor and diplomat. Why would Telford do this? The report did not suggest any answer other than he was delusional and was under some stress. I have to speak with Telford.

"At last, I believe I've smelled out a live trail."

† † †

It was the same early November when Stanley Timmons returned to Portland after his first venture to find Tommy Sherman that Malcolm Williams arrived at the Telford residence.

Malcolm was surprised at the gracious reception he received. When he had called on the telephone beforehand to make the appointment, he only spoke with Mrs. Telford, and she was reserved and hesitant, as anyone would be talking with a stranger who called cold at home. But as Malcolm explained his interest in the Schenk case and told her he was with the FBI, Mrs.

Telford's attitude had changed remarkably and she said Mr. Telford would be available to speak with him the next day, preferably in the morning.

Mrs. Telford showed Malcolm into Telford's office, and when he entered, Telford stood up from behind a large wooden desk, greeted Malcolm with a manly handshake, and motioned him to a comfortable chair across the room. He offered Malcolm mixed nuts from a crystal dish and then sat at the edge of a leather couch some distance from Malcolm's chair in the other corner. Telford exhibited no signs of mental disease, though he appeared to be weary for this early in the day.

Malcolm began. "Thank you for meeting with me, Mr. Telford. I wish to learn anything you might know regarding the departure from this world of Talus Brent Schenk, a college student who died either by suicide or murder, three years ago next month."

Telford nodded in recognition.

"Is my information correct that you offered a confession to this crime following the publication of newspaper accounts?"

"Yes, I'm embarrassed to say I did."

"And the police did not take the confession seriously?"

"That's correct."

"You did not kill Schenk."

"Correct."

"I intend no disrespect, Mr. Telford, but the police report doesn't show any reason for the false confession. As your wife might have explained to you, I'm investigating a series of fatal attacks at abortion clinics around the country. Schenk was employed in security at one such place in Vancouver, and I wanted to know if you could tell me anything to shed light upon these attacks. Anything at all you might tell me, no matter how insignificant, could be helpful."

"I'm not involved in any such business, either of shooting people, bombing clinics, or patronizing them."

"I know, Mr. Telford."

"But that bastard Mark Ponder butchered my daughter at his little rat hole." Telford said this with an enforced calm.

This detail hit Malcolm with something of a shock. He was momentarily affected by the deep sadness he saw in Telford's

eyes, and he thought of his own daughters, who were too young yet to become pregnant. "Mr. Telford, I'm very sorry to hear about your daughter. What was her name?"

"Elisabeth."

"Did she die from abortion complications?"

"Yes."

"Why was it you didn't come out with this to the police?"

"Because I was disoriented at that time. I suffered from distorted thinking brought about by long-term emotional strain."

"You've recovered?"

"Yes, somewhat. Thanks partly to medication, which I take as needed. But the confession wasn't false, Mr. Williams. It was only misdirected. I am a murderer."

"Excuse me?"

"I am a murderer."

"You said you are somewhat recovered, Mr. Telford. Is your belief about being a murderer part of the *not* somewhat?"

Telford smiled a curious smile. "I knew you would think this. I'm not a reliable witness even against myself, eh? And that *was* true once, but I assure you I have killed a man and can prove it. This was a contributing reason for my past problems—resultant guilt. This is why I wanted to speak with you, and I thought you came because the truth had emerged. But I see I'll have to show you the body. *Habeas corpus*. I need to confess the truth now, and take the consequences that follow."

Malcolm leaned forward to listen, expecting to be amused.

"Nine years ago, in April, I came home from New Zealand to attend to my mother's funeral. She died from cancer—I mean, she committed suicide upon learning she had cancer. She thought she had a malignant form, but we're not really sure. This was just after my father died from a long bout with cancer.

"Anyway, while in the States, I had some minor business to attend to one evening at the University campus, where I taught between stints with the diplomatic corps. The University allowed me to keep my old office, since my appointment in New Zealand was politically dependent and likely to be temporary. I kept books and papers there. There was one person in the Political Science/International Relations department, a person I wished to avoid, and I hoped to slip in and out of the building

without running into this person. I finished my work and was leaving. Unfortunately, he was in his office late with his door open, and he hailed me as I passed in the hall. I'll not recount the conversation now, but his purpose was to taunt me by inquiring about my wife. Her name is Valerie."

"I know."

"This man followed me outside, and his ridicule became obscene. I exploded in anger and struck at him, but he ducked the blow and laughed at me. My next strike hit home, because while he laughed, I pulled a knife and stabbed him between the ribs. He fell to his knees and I stepped behind him and cut his throat. I panicked then, and dragged the body into some shrubbery nearby and tucked the limbs and head into the fetal position to hide it better."

"Excuse me for interrupting, but where did the knife come from?"

"I kept it for self-defense. It traveled with me in my luggage."

"Where's the knife now?"

"I threw it away."

"Where did you throw it?"

"Into the Willamette River, off the Broadway Bridge."

"When did you throw it away?"

Telford had to stop and think about this. "The year Schenk died. *Before* he died."

"That was several years after you killed this man. Why did you wait so long before disposing of the knife?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. Why is this important?"

"It may not be. Okay. I'm sorry for interrupting. Please go on. You hid the body."

"That night at the hotel while it drizzled, I didn't sleep, but tortured myself for a way to hide the body permanently. When I had been on the campus the day before, I noticed there was major landscaping in progress. Inquiring, I found out that a planting ceremony was planned for the weekend. One particularly large tree, five or six inches diameter in the trunk, was prepared for installation, and the hole was already dug. The grounds were a particular interest of mine. When I am on the campus, I often discuss with the university engineer the plans she has for improvements. The day after I killed this man, which

was . . . a Friday, I rented a pickup truck, a trailer, and a motorized cart like those used in the grounds department."

"Excuse me," Malcolm said, jumping in. "You killed him on a Friday? Or—"

"I rented the equipment on Friday, bought digging tools, picked up work clothes and gloves. In the evening, while it was still light but after the landscape crews had quit for the day, I wrapped the body in burlap cloth, loaded it on the cart, and moved it to the planting site. I dug the hole for that large tree several feet deeper and planted the body under where the tree was to go. I remember . . . there was mist falling again that evening. That helped rinse away the blood. I returned the rented equipment, left the tools in a neighborhood where someone, anyone, would pick them up, went to my hotel room, threw away the work clothing, and cleaned up. About midnight, I began the flight back to New Zealand as planned. The following morning, a landscape crew, with help from members of an urban arborist society, put the tree and several others into the ground, and that same tree grows now, healthy and strong."

Telford, wearing an expression of profound sadness, fell silent. Malcolm said nothing, but waited. Telford broke his contemplation by saying, almost inaudibly, "It's a beautiful American Beech, *Fagus grandifolia*. Did you know, if planted in a protected place out of the wind, they keep their serrated, golden-tan leaves all through the winter? Their . . . their shallow root system makes it hard to grow turf around them, however."

The story fascinated Malcolm, but it was not what he needed for his investigation. And yet, duty required him to report it to the police. It might be true. Since Telford was talkative, Malcolm might as well ask a few questions.

"Who was it you murdered, Mr. Telford?"

"Isaac Akpata, a Nigerian graduate student whom we had known since he came to the United States as a college freshman. His family is in the ruling class in his country. He and my wife were . . . intimate. The University encouraged faculty to adopt international students, and we welcomed him into our home, and he charmed and seduced my wife. He was a soccer player and a fine specimen of manhood—popular with my children. He had strong teeth and a bright smile. This affair became known to me

when he was a fourth-year undergrad, the year before we left for New Zealand. My accepting the appointment removed my wife from the situation."

"He wasn't a U.S. citizen?"

"That's correct."

"Uh, Mr. Telford, you understand that I'll report this to the police. Being from another country, it's possible the U.S. government will have a role in your case. But, to complete the story, I have two more questions. First, you say you killed him with a knife—"

Telford interrupted. "I take your point, I think, Mr. Williams. How can a middle-aged diplomat overcome a strapping athlete? This might seem odd to you, but I always considered expertise in the martial arts a requirement for international relations. It is, Mr. Williams, a dangerous world. We made sure our children were trained to defend themselves, too. What was your second final question?"

"Okay. Could you possibly tell me under which tree the body was, uh, planted?"

Telford handed him precise printed directions and a campus map that he had marked.

"Very good. Thank you for this information." Malcolm folded the papers and put them in his pocket. "It might appear rude to quickly change the subject, but there's a detail you haven't given on the Schenk matter. And I know this is very personal, but do you know who . . . the father of the baby was, your daughter's baby?"

Telford's face clouded. He appeared to struggle with his old rage and mania. But in a few moments, he resumed his controlled demeanor. "I don't know who the father was. She hid her boyfriends from me, but . . ." Telford tilted up his head, turning his thoughts inward. "But I recall, the night Bethy died, a young man came to the door asking about her. Not Schenk."

"What do you remember about him?"

"He was medium build, not tall or short. Dark-haired. He looked Greek or Italian. Muscular."

"Anything else?"

"No, it was dark and . . . and I chased him off with a shotgun."

"Okay. I see. A *shotgun*?"

"Yes. It wasn't loaded."

"Was he driving anything?"

"A small pickup that I hadn't seen before."

"Is this all you remember?"

"Yes."

"You didn't happen to notice a license plate? I suppose not. What about your daughter's other friends? Do you know anyone I may contact?"

"And what would be your purpose, again?"

"I'm exploring for leads on the killing of Talus Schenk and attacks on the abortion clinics. One possible motive would be revenge for your daughter's death. Her friends might be able to tell me something about this."

"Oh, yes."

Malcolm thought this interview was not running as smoothly as it had at first.

Telford continued. "I'm sorry to say, I know little about my daughter's friends, and I don't exactly blame her. Some girls played music at her graveside. She played soccer . . ." Telford was barely able to squeeze out the words in short phrases ". . . And ran track . . . I believe . . . and . . . she was in school plays . . . but I never . . . went to them. I . . . I bought her perfume once . . . when I was in Rome." He broke down into silent sobbing.

Malcolm waited.

When Telford repossessed his voice, he tried to say more. "They shipped her all the way to a Portland hospital from Vancouver. I . . . I don't know why. Maybe to hide her. My wife . . . and I had to go pick up Bethy's car at . . . that ab . . . abominable place. They called us and said if we didn't get it, they'd have it towed. We took the car home and . . . went to be with Bethy and . . . she . . . died that night . . . I couldn't stay."

Telford ceased trying to talk.

When Malcolm thought Telford had recovered sufficiently, he said, "Mr. Telford, I'm sorry about your loss. I mean it. I'm sorry. That's all I can think of asking. If something else comes to mind, please call me. Here's my card."

Telford took the card and Malcolm readied to go.

"Uh, Mr. Williams," Telford resumed softly, "how soon do you think it will be until they arrest and charge me? How long?"

"The Akpata incident? Well, it will be up to the police and the state district attorney's office, Mr. Telford. You might wish to be . . . thinking of whom you want for your defense attorney."

"But I'm pleading guilty."

"You should have an attorney."

"I understand."

When Telford walked Malcolm to the office door, Malcolm awkwardly patted him on the back.

+ + +

Later in his office, Malcolm tried to piece this all together. He typed his notes, turned in a report on the alleged Akpata killing to his supervisor, and contacted the Portland police. He reached the women's soccer and cross-country coaches and asked for information on team members who might have known Elisabeth Telford. They were cooperative, but the lists he received were not helpful in that they were long, and it would take weeks to reach the girls, some of whom had graduated and moved away. He did make a dozen calls and came up with nothing. Elisabeth had been secretive about this particular romance. Other duties prevented Malcolm from chasing more leads.

+ + +

One night, in bed with his wife sleeping beside him, Malcolm began framing the puzzle by finding the border from the straight cut of certain pieces. This sniper who randomly targets abortionists all over the country, but never in the Portland Metro area. And there were a few other geographic gaps. These items together suggesting that the assassin avoids his home base in order to not draw attention to it, but he also camouflages his base. This was not an ironclad conclusion, but it gave Malcolm material to work with. A young man whose girlfriend dies from abortion. He kicks out a window, shows up late at night at her house, and then takes to the road in revenge? What about this piece: the doctor who mangles the girl dissolves at his own will? That last idea did not fit any of the wildest scenarios Malcolm could imagine. Was the doctor running from the young man? Possibly. But were there other unusual abortionist disappearing acts? With that question in mind, he fell into sleep.

The next day Malcolm searched and made phone calls. Yes, there were more disappearances, and more than he expected. The only answer: there were other agents at work, and not only a lone wolf assassin. Each disappearance had different sets of events and facts, but they all had one thing in common: they were unsolved, and most of them, according to Malcolm's reading were baffling. Then there was the vanishing act of Senator M. Initially, everyone believed that M had been incinerated in his car, but rumors now circulated within the government that M's "murder" might have been a ruse.

Malcolm was in the shower, not thinking about anything, when a question shot through him like an icy chill. What if all these disappearances were coordinated by a single organization? He felt a sudden sickening fear like his own recurrent dream: the transport plane's door banging open prior to a training jump. He is at the head of the line. The door, which might be a safe portal to rushing air and adrenaline, to thrill, beauty, freedom, ending in a routine landing, suddenly becomes a yawning, sucking maw portending a terrifying fall to death. He felt this fear, because an organization effectively carrying out such detailed, multilayered operations would be as powerful as it was invisible.

This was the idea that ripped away his parachute.

At the FBI office, Malcolm said nothing of these thoughts to his colleagues because he believed they were farfetched. Possible, but not probable. In his own mind, however, despite the gaps, they formed the picture he needed to explain everything. The problem was that although he was now convinced of the possibility, there was no evidence whatever that such an organization existed. Again, late one night at his basement workbench, Malcolm audio recorded his candid speculations.

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For a long while, he heard nothing about the Akpata case, and after the New Year—in March—he checked with the state district attorney's office. They had not seen his report. Not a whisper of a grand jury, and no charges brought against Telford. Out of curiosity Malcolm at last called Telford on the phone.

Telford also had been wondering. He had received no calls from the police, he said, and his attorney had been stumped.

Malcolm laughed grimly. "You know what, Mr. Telford? I don't think anyone cares about this case. It's nine going on ten years old. The victim may have been a black sheep in his family. Otherwise, they would have campaigned to find out what happened to him. I suggest that you confess your sin to your priest, do penance and move forward in your life. They might bring it up later, but it appears that the government doesn't care."

"I have confessed it. Turning myself in is part of the penance."

"Well, I wouldn't recommend it, but have you contacted the family in Nigeria?"

"Actually, yes, Mr. Williams. A few weeks after you left."

"What did they say?"

"I spoke with the man's father, and he pretended to not know about whom I was talking. He said he did not have a son by that name and insisted no son of his would be involved in adultery."

"Mr. Telford, are you certain that this Akpata person really existed?"

Telford did not answer. The line was silent.

"Okay. I'm sorry. I apologize. There's one more thing. Would you mind telling me who you confessed to? I know it doesn't seem important, but this is ah, more of a personal question. From what I have read of your record, you did experience some . . . some severe disorientation. But from what I have known of you, you are, shall I say, rational and stable. I mean, I see no evidence of problems. Was there anyone who really helped you? I'm not asking for myself, but for a niece."

"I don't mind. The priest who conducted Bethy's burial is my confessor. But the person who helped me more was Dr. Eberhardt Sterne. We met twice a month for over two years after Bethy died, and now we see each other only once or twice a year. He isn't a practicing psychiatrist or psychologist and didn't want a fee; he was the father of one of my daughter's friends. I attended his book discussion groups for a while."

"Oh, I see. Thank you, Mr. Telford. Wait. Do you know the name of your daughter's friend?"

"Yes . . . let me think . . . I don't remember."

"Why didn't you tell me about her before?"

"I'm sorry. You *had* asked about Bethy's friends, but I had forgotten about her until now. I began to think of her only as Dr. Sterne's daughter, one of his several children. He and I became close friends. Dr. Eberhardt Sterne."

Malcolm slowly said Sterne's name as he wrote it down.

"Do you need help spelling? Starts with an—"

"No. I got it. I'll pass the information on to my wife's sister."

Telford cleared his throat. He sounded troubled.

"Is there anything else, Mr. Telford?"

"Uh, yes."

Telford did not continue and so Malcolm asked, "What is it?"

"Since, since I spoke with you, I've had nightmares. The other night, I dreamed the FBI gave me a psychological test. I was supposed to paint different colors with my hands, like the finger painting that children do. The red was thick and the color of blood. When I used it, I couldn't wash it from my hands. I didn't know whether to ignore it and say nothing or to protest this indignity. I figured that the FBI had researched and knew exactly what a murderer would do in response to fake blood. I wonder when the nightmares will go away."

"I couldn't say. You haven't killed anyone else, have you?"

"That's it. I don't remember. But the dream is so real."

"I suggest you talk to Dr. Sterne."

The next day, Malcolm searched the archives of the University student newspaper. He read that, indeed, Isaac Akpata from Nigeria had existed, and he had gone missing, leaving no vestige, at the time of Telford's mother's funeral—all as Telford had said. Malcolm also found a larger story and photographs about the tree planting project, whose dedication on that Saturday in April had been attended by Mayor Adams and Governor Kulongoski. Malcolm wondered if perhaps the crime went uninvestigated because the University did not wish to cut down the valuable tree to recover Akpata's moldering bones.

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Up until the multiple kidnapping raids and firebombings of abortion clinics around the country six months after his interview with Telford, Malcolm was alone in holding his conspiracy

theory. He again confided his private, unofficial thoughts to a recording made at his workbench.

"After these dramatic, orchestrated attacks, talk flew throughout the agency and the whole nation that a new threat existed to the United States government. But there's a serious problem with this suspicion. It isn't strong enough. I've been considering for months the possibility of a secret, organized resistance within the borders of the United States, but no one else understands how deep this conspiracy, in theory, would have to reach into the government, because, as I've recorded before, there is no evidence. The biggest clue, to my way of thinking, is that there *are* no clues. The rest of the agency is in the process of discovering this by running down thousands of empty leads and half-developed ideas. I still have said nothing to anyone because . . . I'll be ridiculed. They can discover this hypothesis on their own, if it doesn't come too late.

"I did, however, contribute the primary idea of leaving geographically selected abortion facilities vulnerable as bait for 'Octopus' and for another group attack, though I didn't receive recognition for the idea. I should have, perhaps, not because it was such an extraordinary plan, but because I thought of it first. My idea, in detail, is to publicize the recalcitrant operators of three clinics who refuse to comply with new government security measures, and replace the personnel at those clinics with law enforcement units, and set up special surveillance groups. Those clinics would present targets for terrorists, but in reality they will be steel-jawed traps. I additionally suggested a name for my plan, which I called Operation Honeysuckle, after a vine whose flower produces a sweet scent. It makes me dizzy. It isn't a perfect analogy, because the plant smothers and strangles its host and not a creature attracted by the smell, but it worked for everyone in the Portland office . . ."

Malcolm did not say his personal observation, "if only because of the irony that abortion centers are anything but sweet."

"Both my idea and the name filtered up through the FBI and came back to me as a directive from Ms. Nguyen that I organize Operation Honeysuckle in the Portland area—but not at Barbara Ponder's Vancouver clinic; she wishes to comply with the federal requirements.

"Drawing from multiple agencies makes it possible to recruit staff for Honeysuckle nationwide. Officers are selected for random passersby, truck and taxi drivers, mailmen, vendors, customers, sales clerks, waitresses in nearby restaurants, garbage collectors—anyone who can conceivably be planted in the neighborhood. The original people in these positions won't, of course, be told why they'll be given a three-week—or longer—paid leave, or temporary transfers. They'll be told to zip their lips. I plan to be with the protestors on the sidewalk as much as possible. I arranged around the Portland clinic for a block in every direction so that there would be no instant and no square foot out of doors—and few indoors—that won't be under observation. People will watch in staggered shifts around the clock. This is the plan, though I predict there will be breakdowns and loopholes in the Portland operation. It should bother me, but it doesn't, because instinct tells me that the assassin won't select Portland. If he shows up anywhere, of the two other baited locations, I guess it will be Salt Lake City, where, except for Talus Schenk (if his murder, indeed, was done by Octopus), the killing campaign began. I'll let Salt Lake worry about their loopholes.

"I really don't think that the sophisticated bomber/abductors, as such, will strike again."

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A few months after its inception, Operation Honeysuckle was set into motion and the supposed vulnerability of the three abortion clinics was given the appropriate promotion through the news.

The operation was top-down work, but it might help to continue following a bottom-up track. Malcolm was nearly certain he would be chasing his tail, but as he had no other interesting leads now, and as he had already discovered so much fascinating unrelated information, and not being content with passively waiting, he wished to keep pursuing the Telford connection. One-third into Honeysuckle, when he finally got a break, he called Eberhardt Sterne at home and asked permission to speak with his daughter for the purpose of learning more, if possible, about the Telford girl's boyfriend.

Sterne courteously said, "My daughter Mindy was kidnapped a few weeks ago. If the government gave this matter due consideration, she might be found, and in time, with healing, she might be willing to speak with you. My daughter has two young children and a husband who are grieving."

"I'm sorry about your tragedy, Dr. Sterne. Do you think your son-in-law would be available? He might know something about your daughter's college friends. I know this is a troubling time for you."

"My son-in-law is away from town."

"Is he reachable by telephone? It would be helpful if I could speak with him."

"You'll understand that he is suffering a serious trauma. I'll contact him and ask if he will speak with you. Likely, he will, but I must ask his permission."

"Sounds fair enough."

"I will say, he would rather hear that the government is redoubling its efforts to find his wife and punish those who took her and raped and murdered my son's fiancée. In this country, there are organized criminals who mock the law."

"Ah . . . it may be so, Dr. Sterne, but the government will hardly listen to me. You should make your appeal higher."

"I have done so."

"But is there anything *you* might tell me about Elisabeth Telford and her boyfriend? You are acquainted with her father, Dr. Telford, correct?"

"My profession binds me to keep confidences, Mr. Williams. That's what I can tell you. You'll have to speak with my son-in-law. I wish to return to my family time now. I have several young children."

"Can you tell me where he is?"

"Please, let me talk to him first."

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Sterne had evaded giving Malcolm information, but with the antiterrorism laws, it was simple to get a judge's clearance to tap the Sternes' telephones, and Malcolm soon had recordings of the son-in-law reading stories to his two-year-old son.

And alarms rang.

When he listened to portions of the recordings one morning in his office cubicle, Malcolm could not help but be moved by the fatherly affection Timmons had for his children in the midst of the young man's personal tragedy. But now Malcolm knew where he was located.

Stan Timmons happened to be in the same city—the same neighborhood—as where the middle Honeysuckle trap had been set, and his best guess of Octopus's target. The possibility of Timmons being the person they sought passed through Malcolm's mind, but there was not much information to go on. According to phone records, Timmons had been traveling considerably. Most of the killings and bombing/abductions had been in other places, but not all. This information was engaging and not inconsistent with the picture that Malcolm was assembling but could not visualize yet. Stanley Timmons might fill the gaps in the puzzle.

Malcolm had to travel to Salt Lake City to see Timmons without delay, and he jumped up and jogged to Ms. Nguyen's office.

"You have responsibilities here with Honeysuckle!" Nguyen said vehemently. "We can send agents from Salt Lake City to talk with Timmons."

"True," Malcolm said, "but a loss here is more than balanced with the positives of me joining the effort in Salt Lake, even at the last minute, where I think Octopus or a terrorist group is likely to appear. Getting away eliminates the risk of damaging my identity in the local protestor group if we take action. Timmons is the only flesh-and-blood entity of interest we have."

Nguyen nodded slightly several times, thinking.

Malcolm continued. "Even if there's only a remote possibility that Timmons is linked to Octopus, we must give this our best effort, and frankly, I'm the best person to contact him."

Nguyen remembered that Operation Honeysuckle was Malcolm's brainchild, and this tilted her decision. She trusted his brilliance and instinct, and said, "Fine. I'll let you pursue your wild goose chase. You'll have to drive a government car, however; the expense account will not cover airfare."

Malcolm paused for emphasis and said carefully, "I'll have to be compensated by taking my family along with me and arranging leave days so we can explore around Salt Lake. We always liked that part of the country, especially southern Utah, with the arches and canyons and red sandstone."

Nguyen was exasperated with Malcolm's ingenuity in turning hardships into advantages, and she yelled, "You have a record, Agent Williams, of receiving privileges around here!" She yelled that and more.

Unflustered, Malcolm took a photograph from his wallet. "Holly is six years old and Jasmine is three."

Ms. Nguyen had met Malcolm's wife, Belinda, before but had never paid attention to the children, even though Malcolm kept their photos at his desk. In the end, she let him take his family in a government car. As he left her office, she muttered, "I hope your excursion pays. I don't know how you get away with it!" but in her heart, she appreciated his contributions.

She called the Salt Lake office and informed them that Malcolm was coming.

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Malcolm and his wife took turns driving. With a few hours of rest overnight at a motel midway, and with the girls napping in the car as they drove, they arrived in Salt Lake City early afternoon the second day. The agency supplied a minimal *per diem* for lodging, and by arranging a special discount and adding his own vacation fund money, the Williams family had spacious rooms looking east toward the mountains. Belinda Williams set about finding places to visit around Salt Lake City. The family would be sightseeing during the day while Malcolm worked, and he would take some time off after the interview with Timmons. She wanted to tour the Temple Square, hear a musical performance there, and go to a children's museum. Malcolm said he would spend a day out at the salt lake—maybe rent a sailboat—and then play golf at a spectacular course in the mountains.

Work, however, came first. That evening, though fatigued from travel, he was briefed in an empty conference room of his hotel by the assistant special agent in charge of the Salt Lake

City Division, Robert Lindsey Reynard, who was supervising the operation in the city. Reynard was a small-built, take-command leader, who, unknown to himself, signaled his wide-ranging emotions in his face. If he felt anger, strength, tenderness, embarrassment, boredom—whatever it was—Malcolm, or the world, if it cared to notice, could read him like a billboard. Despite his best intentions, he was a man incapable of deceit.

As a courtesy, Reynard asked for Malcolm's opinion of his setup, and Malcolm said it was "completely satisfactory," but also asked, "Are your abortion workers wearing armor?"

"Yes yes. But we obviously can't have them in helmets."

"I came to Salt Lake to interview someone and not to contribute directly to your efforts, unless you have a specific role for me."

"Who do you want to see? Stanley Pierce Timmons?"

"You knew already."

The administrative agent scowled. "No! You're not serious. Stanley Timmons? We've been watching him for a week. He sits outside right in the middle of the zone, half dressed, scratching himself. He's been sunbathing, reading a novel, and trying to arrange job interviews."

"Are you sure it's him?"

"Of course! We ran the license plate, which traced to his employer in Portland. The office there lent him the vehicle. We ID'ed him from his driver's license photograph."

Malcolm could not believe this about Timmons loitering so near the abortion site. "Do you think he could be Octopus?"

Reynard puckered into a frustrated face and rolled his eyes. "No no. But he's a damned nuisance. It took days for our observers to learn to ignore him. He's a fly in our face."

"Are you *sure* he's not the Octopus?"

Reynard stared hard at Malcolm. "What? You think he might be?"

"No." Malcolm shivered involuntarily. "But here in the thick of the soup, he must know who the Octopus is, or be in league with him. A scout."

"That's a silly notion. Why, why do you think this?"

"Timmons' travels roughly mirror the attack patterns."

And Malcolm filled Reynard in with details, though he mentioned nothing about his underground government theory.

At the end of the recitation, Reynard said, "You know, Malcolm, I thought it strange, you coming here when you had your operation in Portland, but this is perfect. Good work." He clapped Malcolm on the shoulder. "What do you think? Should we take Timmons and interrogate him tomorrow, or tonight? He won't mind. He has plenty of time."

"Let's watch what happens, and I'll talk with him about Elisabeth Telford tomorrow afternoon, as I had planned. I'll see how he reacts. We're not in danger of him running, yet. We can always collect him later if necessary. You keep everything functioning because, while he may or may not be an accomplice, I'm positive that Timmons is not the killer, and that other person could show up anytime. You can't relax."

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The next morning, about 10:00 a.m., Malcolm arrived in the parking area of the Bonanza Office Complex behind a long two-story brick building overlooking Stan's vacant lot and the concrete steps going nowhere. Parking for the building was set in the midst of the complex, with rows of buildings between the parking lot and the street. This arrangement enabled Malcolm to enter the building containing the FBI's watching rooms without being noticed. His car, loaned to him by the Salt Lake office, bore civilian tags and his family kept the government car from Portland. The two agents on duty at the post, a husband and wife who took the shift from midnight to noon, welcomed him when he arrived, and Malcolm invited them to leave early. This offer they accepted gratefully.

Malcolm sat in a chair and looked from the open window. It was quiet, and the sunshine warm. A few cars passed by. A charm of finches sang and hopped from branch to branch in a hawthorn tree on the right. A sprinkler system watered the grass between the buildings and the sidewalks. Starlings bathed in a pool filling a low place along the road. From his position, Malcolm could see the back parking area of the abortion center, but a large commercialized house blocked a view of the rest of the property.

Below him across the street, Timmons sat and talked with a dark-skinned, colorfully garbed woman who had just walked up and stood on crooked legs beside him. Malcolm could hear voices, but not their words. He picked up a headset from a table and aimed a handheld dish at them. Now he could hear every detail, and Malcolm pushed the record button on the unit beside the chair. They talked about hospitality and manners, it seemed. Innocent and natural enough. In a few minutes, they walked away toward the house where Timmons was staying, and soon after, the next shift of observers arrived at the door behind Malcolm with sandwiches and soft drinks for themselves and him. He told them about the old woman, and right away one of them arranged on a radio for the woman to be followed when she left the Briggs' house. Malcolm watched and waited in the increasingly stuffy rooms.

The old woman stayed for little less than an hour, after which, as Malcolm supposed, an array of agents began tracking her in turns. Later in the uneventful, tedious afternoon, Malcolm's phone rang. It was Agent Reynard, and he was agitated.

"The old woman you had observed? We lost her. Damn. She simply reduced to nothing. I'll give you the details later. This is *strange*. We should immediately take Mr. Timmons into custody to help us find this woman. Tell me what you think."

Malcolm paused so long that Reynard began to believe the connection had been broken.

"Are you there?"

"Yes."

"What do you think?"

"Let me mull this over. Wait on Timmons. If he knew where to find this woman, they wouldn't rendezvous on the sidewalk here. If we take Timmons now, we'll never see the old woman again. I want to postpone my interview with him. Can you and I meet again this evening at . . . my hotel, to talk?"

Reynard still preferred to question Timmons right away, but reluctantly said it was all right to wait, on the chance the old woman might return. Malcolm left the office apartments to walk around the neighborhood before he returned to the hotel. He needed to decide what to say to Reynard. He walked and stared at the pavement.

Malcolm already knew what he thought, and it was stupefying, but should he try to convince the Bureau? The old woman who ceased to exist was the Octopus who had eluded capture for so long: the fact that some of the top FBI trackers in the nation lost her was a proof. The fact that Stan Timmons came to this vicinity from Portland and met the woman who disappeared suggested that Timmons had intelligence resources that equaled or surpassed those of the U.S. government. The fact that Timmons himself did not disappear but was in the open established that he was not in league with the Octopus, but had another connection. It had to be personal. Timmons must have known the boyfriend of the dead Telford girl, the father of the baby—that person about whom there was no knowledge—the young man Mr. Telford ran off with an empty shotgun. Malcolm could confirm this in his interview with Timmons. But Timmons himself? Wasn't he an operator for the underground government? Malcolm reached back to recall the history he had attributed to this mythical body. The disappearances. "The sniper attacks interfered with the underground organization's agenda, which was kidnapping abortion doctors?" he asked himself. "And Timmons was in the Czech Republic exactly when Senator M was assassinated. Or, was M abducted? I wonder. This would make the Octopus case small potatoes, indeed."

During the walk, Malcolm decided he could persuade Reynard, and with conclusions reached, he looked up from his meditation. Someone whisked by him on the sidewalk, startling him, someone walking fast for exercise. It was Stan Timmons, and Malcolm thought from the brief glimpse he had of his face that Timmons looked deeply troubled and sad.

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That night, Malcolm conveyed his theory to Reynard, who listened and scoffed, but agreed to present it immediately to his superior, the Salt Lake special agent in charge, who Reynard thought would pass it up to a deputy director in the Washington office.

Reynard said, "Let's hold up on the Timmons interview, as you suggested, until Monday or Tuesday at the latest. The

Octopus might return, and we don't want Timmons to warn him away. But the interview is important. We've had our first glimpse of this Octopus, but if he doesn't come back, we need Timmons to tell us who this person is, if he'll talk."

"Sounds good," Malcolm said. "You will pass on my theory about Timmons and his activity with an underground organization?"

"Eee . . . yes," Reynard said with impatience. "I said I would. Now about tomorrow morning. It's Saturday and we'll have 'patients' arriving. If Octopus strikes here, it'll be tomorrow."

"Or never."

"You're right."

"I don't think he'll attack here now. He's too smart. She's too smart. With Timmons here, he knows that he's been uncovered by someone."

"We have to see this through. It's your plan, I've been told."

"I never calculated for Timmons. He opened everything."

"But we're on for tomorrow and I need you. I have everyone in place around the zone and I want you on duty as well. Can you man the Bonanza Office Complex?"

"I was hoping to take time this weekend with the family."

"I'll let you go at noon. You'll have Sunday, and then if nothing breaks, you'll see Timmons first thing Monday morning. Do you need anyone in the Briggs house with you?"

"I don't think so. I want to approach him only on the basis that I'm following up on the deaths of the Telford girl and Talus Schenk. I'll learn more if he's not on full guard."

"All right, but we'll have a closer watch on the Briggs house now, and agents can come to your assistance in less than a minute. Do you want a wire?"

"No."

"Will he bolt when you show up?"

"No. His movements are transparent. The Portland Division is following his telephone conversations to his home. He's a family man who has recently suffered a personal tragedy."

"Well, very good. Though it's none of my business, I hope you have a nice day on Sunday. I probably won't be seeing you tomorrow, unless our Octopus shows up. If he does, we'll be arresting Timmons simultaneously as a potential accomplice. If

Octopus doesn't show, we'll evaluate after the interview what to do next with Timmons."

"And if there's this underground government?"

"Oh, I forgot about that."

"Should I call Portland and tell them my theory? Or should I call Washington myself?" Malcolm knew that Reynard had not taken him seriously.

"No no. I'll take care of it. Your idea is sound. The problem is with the implications. They're unthinkable. Absolutely unthinkable, right? That's why it can't be true. Where are you going on Sunday?"

"We've rented a sailboat for the lake. But—" There was a pause through which Reynard stared, glazed, ready to leave. "Let me give you these audio files," Malcolm said, continuing. "This is a complete record of my thinking."

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Minutes after Tommy Duckwitz as the old woman left the Briggs' house, Stan called Dr. Sterne to give him a report. Sounding discouraged, Stan said that the job search was not going well and he was likely to quit and come home soon. Sterne said, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I am bored out of my mind," Stan answered. "Though I met an interesting old woman today and invited her in for tea. She had an amazing personal story to tell, but she was really lost. I tried to share some apologetics with her, and she seemed receptive to the Psalm I read. She might come back tomorrow."

Sterne said that he would pray for her. And this is how Stan told Sterne that he had found Tommy and how Sterne acknowledged receipt of the message.

Stan waited all through Saturday and had nearly given up hoping for Tommy to return. The day dragged by, and Mr. and Mrs. Briggs brought him several current films to pick from. On Sunday morning he attended a nearby church service after which no one greeted him and he slipped out unnoticed. The remainder of Sunday was tortuously boring as he sat on the steps in the afternoon for show, and consistency. Tommy, it appeared, had fled, and there was no word from Sterne that the Assembly had been able to follow him.

On Sunday night he called the Mollicoat Estate and spoke with Sarah and told her that he would "try one more day." She reported she would help the Sternes move from the Vancouver residence on Monday, and she would have the children with her. Stan read a story to Maxwell, as he did almost every night.

Half crushed with disappointment that his long quest had failed, and half resigned, Stan packed most of his belongings on Monday morning so that he could leave the next morning before sunrise. At noon the home telephone rang, and the Briggs boy answered. He called Stan, who was writing at the kitchen table.

"It's for you."

Stan hoped it was Tommy. "Who is it?"

"A girl. With an Irish accent. Sounds like a recorded voice."

Stan took the receiver and said, "Hello?"

Stan listened calmly, though the message meant the end of the life he had known. It was a message he thought would never come, but the fact that such a thing had been planned in advance made it comprehensible that it had come. It was an order of evacuation, because the Chinook Assembly had been broken, though he knew not how. The words conveyed nothing except this: Stan must now escape from the United States through one of a few options. This was a plan to be utilized only in the most extreme circumstances when otherwise Stan would certainly be killed, or captured and interrogated for information that would lead others to be killed.

Speaking crisply, mechanically, with exaggerated friendliness, the voice said, "Mr. Timmons, you've been selected to receive the grand prize in our World Travel Contest for the dream voyage of your life. For complete details, call our international headquarters. Prepare yourself for the fantasy world cruise, the rugged Himalayan trek, the romantic cross-continental rail journey, pub hopping in Ireland, or any of a dozen other packages. The choice is yours. All you have to do is call right away."

Then there was a phone number.

Stan sarcastically huffed at his own juvenile sense of humor. This was the whimsical message he himself had written to convey the need to implement his personal evacuation plan, his PEP. But he wrote this when he was happy and such a dire

contingency remote, and when his family was intact, and when he thought if the message came, he would be departing with his children and wife. It was a joke and he and Mindy had laughed, because he never dreamed the message would be needed. Now it was not a joke. Unless it was a mistake.

"What happened?" he whispered. No answer came from the other end of the line.

There was no time to think about this. The first option was to travel to the Oregon coast and board a certain fishing boat, and this would be the way Bennett and Sarah would take with his children, if they could. He did not believe he could make that rendezvous by the deadline. Of the second-class methods . . . none seemed desirable.

The message was long over. Stan mindlessly held onto the receiver. Without realizing it, he spoke his thought out loud, "I don't know what to do."

The Irish-accented voice that Stan believed had been a recording said, "Just your best, Stanley Timmons. God bless you." Then he heard "click" and a busy signal.

Again Stan asked, "What happened?"

He hung up the phone and continued to sit at the table. He was too stunned to move or think. He could not believe that the worst had happened. He picked up his phone and tried to call the Sternes at different numbers he had in his contacts list, but, with one exception, they either rang endlessly or else had a message about the line being no longer in service. The exception was the Sternes' Vancouver home number. There, someone picked up the telephone and listened but did not speak. Stan could hear hard breathing, and in the background shouting and a siren, and he hung up quickly. He decided not to call Dr. Sterne's medical office because he didn't want to explain to a nurse. He turned on the television. The lead national news story was about a giant meteor crashing onto a hilltop in northwestern Oregon. That sounded like a preposterous lie. None of the freaky Perseids had ever been a fraction of this size, and the storm had declined a whole week ago.

The Briggs' grandson began packing recklessly, ransacking his room. He had received notice over email, he said when Stan looked in. Mr. and Mrs. Briggs called to say they would be

home soon. They had received their notice but knew nothing else. Stan packed his toothbrush and sat on the bed in his upstairs room and stared at the wall. All he had to do was walk out the door. But to where? The Oregon coast was too far away. Maybe he could go with the Briggs family.

Five minutes later, Malcolm Williams stepped up the sidewalk to the Briggs' home, climbed the back stairs, and knocked hard on the kitchen door. Thinking it might be the Brigges already, Stan went down to the kitchen carrying his suitcase; he saw it was not them and opened the door to the unknown man.

Malcolm asked, "Are you Stanley Timmons?"

"I am."

"May I speak with you?"

Malcolm showed his FBI badge and ID card.

His heart speeding, Stan inspected the identification material and invited him in. In his uncertainty, he had waited too long, Stan thought. He was to be taken into custody. He hoped the Briggs family could get away.

Stan showed Malcolm a kitchen chair, the same chair Tommy had taken, and Malcolm sat in it heavily. To Stan's complete amazement, Malcolm covered his face in his hands and froze for what felt like an excruciating minute, but really it was fifteen seconds. Stan might have assumed he had fallen asleep, except it would be impossible to sleep in this position without dropping one's head onto the table. The longer this went on, the safer Stan felt, thinking surely this FBI agent had not come to arrest him. It must be something else. Something strange.

Finally, Stan said, "Uh, Mr. Williams, I'm in a hurry, what do you want?"

At that moment, Mr. and Mrs. Briggs arrived, stomping up the back steps. They dashed through the kitchen in controlled panic mode and said not a word to Stan or to Malcolm. The screen door slammed behind them.

Malcolm scarcely took notice, and at last he spoke. "Mr. Timmons, I have come to offer my service. You don't know me, but you'll have to trust me when I say you're in danger, and I'm a person you can depend upon. We must leave now. Look at

this photograph. It's my family and me. They are the only reference I can give you that what I say is true."

Stan stepped to the kitchen door, and in the light coming through the door's window, he looked at the picture Malcolm had removed from his wallet. An attractive woman wore fashionable ski attire and goggles on her head. She leaned affectionately against Malcolm, who was clad in the same way. The picture had caught them laughing. Two young girls below them laughed and hugged each other. The girls were a little older than his own children. Deep snow lay on the ground behind them and fresh flakes fell.

Rising from the chair, Malcolm said, "Mt. Hood last spring. I live in the Portland area. My family is with me here in Salt Lake. You must leave now, Mr. Timmons."

Stan peered out the window. He saw parked along the street a full-sized sedan with privacy windows. Stan looked back to Malcolm. "What happened?"

"The U.S. government bombed the Chinook Assembly."

"What? What do you mean 'bombed?' They blew up the office?"

"They didn't bomb the office. They bombed the entire Mollicoat Estate. They bombed it into oblivion. It's gone, and no one who was there could possibly be alive."

Malcolm's announcement was disturbed by the hurried departure of the three members of the Briggs family. They wished Stan good luck as they bumped their luggage through the kitchen and left the house. The screen door slammed again, but the other door remained wide open.

Malcolm said forcefully, "We must hurry. The FBI will be here officially any moment to arrest you."

Stan groaned. Despair washed over him. He felt lightheaded as the room faded out and then returned into his awareness. He had almost passed out. His voice came out flat and shaky. "I don't know where to go, exactly. I don't care. I might have gone with my friends who just left."

"Mr. Timmons, you will be safer with me. I suggest we get away from this house. You leave your van somewhere and let me take you wherever you decide. The school where you went for the teaching interview is a perfect place to abandon the

vehicle. It might appear you walked up into the mountains. Let's go right away. Right now!"

Stan had to think a second. Could this be a trick from the government to fool him into revealing information? No. Malcolm was telling the truth. Stan picked up his suitcase.

"Wait," Malcolm said. "Let me see your telephone."

Stan pulled it from his pocket, and Malcolm put on gloves and picked it up. He paced around the kitchen, searching, and found a heavy wooden knife block. He dumped the knives out and smashed the phone on the countertop into a dozen pieces. "That phone had become your enemy. It transmits your location. I'll lock the house and be right behind you."

Stan took up his suitcase again and walked out the door, leaving the television and lights on. He did not look around to see who might be watching him; it would not have helped, anyway. If they were spotted, then they were spotted. Stan drove the van a few blocks away from the abortion place, and Malcolm had not followed. It was impossible to concentrate on driving. He stopped and waited, and presently Malcolm pulled up behind him. They drove north and east, as Stan had before, Malcolm trailing Stan, to the school set against the mountains. Once there, Stan transferred his suitcase into the government car and climbed into the passenger side.

"Next we pick up my wife and girls, and we'll take you wherever you want to go, Mr. Timmons." Malcolm had spoken cheerfully, but Stan could hear behind the rich voice a note of anguish. "In case you wondered why you had to wait for me, I paused as a ruse of me following without your knowing. It might give protection against anyone seeing me at the Briggs' house. Let . . . let me explain what's happened—what I know."

As he traced their course back toward Salt Lake City, Malcolm gave Stan an overview of his work in investigating the attacks against abortion clinics and of his theory about the existence of an underground government operating within the borders of the United States. "Those two tracks met together here in Salt Lake, and that's how I discovered who you are."

Out of fear, suspicion, and confusion, Stan had been holding back the manifest question, but now he asked: "Why are you helping me? This is weird, really weird."

"To tell you the truth, I violently disagree with the government . . . annihilating your compound in Oregon. This is something I never anticipated, and I'm not the only person in the government who is repulsed beyond belief. I'm responsible for exposing you, Mr. Timmons. If it hadn't been for me . . . When I told them last Friday night of my theory, and that your contact with Octopus revealed the actuality of the underground organization, I assumed they'd follow a classical approach of investigation and prosecutions. I never dreamed the government . . . I'm horrified that I'm . . . my work is the cause."

Stan's angry questions burst forth like water breaching a dam. "How? Why did they kill all those people? The military killing American citizens like this? My family?"

"Mr. Timmons, I'm so sorry." Malcolm's voice trembled. "I'm carrying a heavy . . . I can hardly hold myself together, but we have to get you to a safe place. I don't know for sure why the government took this measure. I have bits of information passed along during the weekend and in the last hour, but mostly what I have are guesses. I'm a good guesser, Mr. Timmons, more so than I ever thought, so maybe I'm not far from the truth.

"What I supposed about the Chinook Assembly I presented to the ASAC here in Salt Lake City. His name is Reynard. Apparently, he passed it up, and it struck like a thunderbolt through the entire chain of command of the U.S. government. The powers that be—probably CIA—gave the Mollicoat Estate a look. What they saw scared them to death, so much that, in consultation with the president, they decided to bomb it rather than try to infiltrate or conduct an investigation. They sacrificed their ethics to avoid a *coup d'état* threat from your organization. I'm guessing you had the ability to take control, or else provide a credible contest for power, and not only militarily but politically. I believe that you have sympathetic persons at every level of the government and in industry, the press, and in the general populace. Direct infiltration of your organization might have led to conversions of the infiltrators, conversions to your cause. You would have become stronger. We would not only have lost assets, but had them engaging in counter-espionage against us. If it got so far as conducting trials, your people would have turned them into trials against the government itself. There

wasn't time to undermine potential support for your organization by propaganda. Thus, the government recognized the danger that the organization threatened. Of course, this is all speculation. Even with the risk posed by the Assembly, it seems irrational that the government would bomb the Mollicoat compound so soon after discovery.

"I heard last night that it was honeycombed with tunnels and underground offices—catacombs. An international leader of the organization, Eberhardt Sterne—your father-in-law—his home in Vancouver was a complex communication center with a large bunker dug into the ground underneath the house and accessed by an elevator masterfully hidden, and with micro-satellite dishes on the roof. The information came from sources that made it appear not to be propaganda, and so I *believe* it to be true, because, well, there were no accounts of guns or missiles or anything absurd at the Sterne home, which would be the case if the government were attempting to validate its action with false accusations."

Stan's stomach was churning. "I never knew about bunkers."

Malcolm glanced sharply at Stan and turned back to face the road. "Your role was limited then. Did you expect that your father-in-law would tell you everything?"

"I guess not. What kind of bomb was it?"

"Did you ever hear of MOP?"

"From my uncle."

"This was the latest generation of the type. Massive Ordnance Penetrator. More powerful and deadly than anything we have tested before, excepting nuclear. There also was another type of bomb that I've never heard of. Many people were killed."

Shock settling in now, Stan was profoundly depressed. "My parents probably died, and my children maybe, my sister and her family—my nephew and nieces. My wife's parents. Friends. This can't be true."

Malcolm shook his fist at the windshield. "If the government thinks that arrests and trials and publicity would have gained more sympathy for revolution than this atrocity, then they have miscalculated. This indiscriminate killing of civilians—hundreds of them—and children, too, has made me into a damned revolutionary." Nearly shouting, Malcolm continued.

"And they waited until Monday to bomb it, instead of the weekend! They waited until all the workers were there!" Not as loud, he said, "At least the children were away at school."

"Children live at the Chinook Assembly campus and are homeschooled," Stan said numbly. "There's a daycare, too. There *was* one."

In his present mood, Stan did not care if he were arrested or killed. There did not seem to be anything to live for, unless it was to find out if any of his family survived. The bomb had dropped today, this day? Sarah and her children, and his, were supposed to be away from the Mollicoat Estate today. There was hope, but his pain was so overwhelming; he had no capacity for anger now.

Probably seeing Stan's state of mind, Malcolm kept talking, though more calmly. "Listen. I've been recruited into your organization. I'll do anything to undo a little of what I've done."

Warmed by the expression of friendship, Stan thought awhile, then said, "Take me back to Portland. I have someone I want to see. If he's still around. He wasn't close to the Assembly, but he might know something. But how safe are you?"

"It doesn't matter. All the same, I think I can clear myself. My task for the morning had been to question you for information about Octopus. This was today's assignment, as of Saturday, when I confirmed my last 'order' from the FBI. With the bombing today at 10:03 a.m. Pacific time, all that changed, but not officially. I was never told to arrest you. My phone's not working." Malcolm showed it to Stan. "It's cracked. I dropped it on the pavement during my morning run."

Malcolm paused for effect, but Stan did not respond to the attempt at humor. Malcolm went on.

"In the intensity of decapitating your organization, you, my friend, were overlooked for a few hours. I never heard a change in orders, but likely a tactical team arrived at your house minutes after our departure. All this was done in such haste that I'm sure I've slipped through the cracks, too. Again, this is guesswork, and it's safe guesswork, because it won't hurt more if I'm wrong. If I'm caught, I'm caught. But I'll tell them I went to interview you and you absconded from the house. I tried to follow, and you eluded me. Listen, I shouldn't tell you this, but

probably half of the Salt Lake agents are on your side now. There's huge dissatisfaction and bitterness."

"What happened to Tommy Duckwitz? Did you catch him?"

"Who?"

"Oh, oh. I mean the Octopus."

"Duckwitz? Is this his name?"

"Who?" Stan un-artfully pretended ignorance.

"The old woman. Damn it, you know who I mean. The mysterious boyfriend of Elisabeth Telford."

"What will you do about him?"

"Me? Absolutely nothing. Not now that this has happened. Besides, he got away. That's how we guessed who he was. The government will believe that he and your organization are linked, but he's only one ring in the chain. You aren't linked, are you?"

"No. Except by friendship. In the past."

"What were you doing with him?"

"Trying to convince him to stop killing people."

"Interesting. And this, your kindness for your friend, your courage, betrayed you."

"I guess so."

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They rode along in silence, and crushing regrets weighed upon Stan. If only he had not been so foolish as to put his family and the Chinook Assembly at risk by this vain attempt to rescue Tommy. He had made a stupid decision not to walk with Mindy and Coral on Mt. St. Helens, and they were lost. And if he had stayed home and not come to Salt Lake City, this unthinkable catastrophe would not have happened! Guilt and anger at his inadvertent betrayal of the Assembly made him want to die. He could open the door and fall onto the pavement at 70 mph. But now, even the nerve to take his own life failed him. He muttered, "God, if it be your will, kill me now."

Malcolm heard the prayer. "Don't think so highly of yourself," he said. "It isn't your fault. No one deserves blame more than me. It's unlikely anyone else in the FBI could have uncovered your organization. You were safe until I came along. You have to live, to redeem the situation, to redeem history."

Stan's darkness lifted a little and he decided that he would wait to see what happened. Like a man injured in an automobile accident being taken to the hospital, he was no longer in control, but just going along for the ride in someone else's hands.

They drove a while longer without speaking until Malcolm said, "Here's the hotel. Don't get out of the car."

Malcolm's family had been waiting outside the hotel's side entrance. No one else was around. They loaded their luggage and drove away in a matter of a minute. Malcolm was to drive the first shift. Mrs. Williams, obviously a warm and friendly person, was well disposed toward Stan and his plight, but she was strained by the circumstances and did not know what to say to him because of the loss of his family. She did, however, inadvertently do what was best—treated him like one of her family with whom words were not necessary. She fed him snacks handed up from the back, and after a few hours they stopped at a rest area. When they were about to get back into the car, she asked if he would read to their girls. Suddenly nervous that she had extended her trust too far, she cast her eyes across the top of the car to her husband, who nodded approval. Stan got in the back between the girls, and while Mrs. Williams drove and Malcolm slept, he read the long miles behind them.

They took no overnight rest in Idaho on this trip, and to compensate for it, they asked Stan to drive and took turns at naps. All along, Malcolm carried on occasional muted conversations on Mrs. Williams' phone. He was monitoring events around the country. They listened to the radio and learned that the nation had jumped to the highest terrorist alert. Malcolm said, "They are rounding up as many in the Assembly as they can, and other dissidents besides."

Malcolm asked Stan many questions about his life and experiences and was impressed with what he had endured. At one point he asked Stan, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight. My birthday was this month. Why?"

"I just wondered. I'm eight years older than you. When I was your age, I had just left Iraq after major fighting in that war ended. I think we are headed for another war, Stan. Within our own borders. It's already started. If you survive, you're going to have a role in the coming conflicts."

"Why do you say this?"

"Without trying, you seem to be in the middle of it all."

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Toward noon of the second day of travel, the Columbia River came into view. After entering the town of Cascade Locks, where they were to cross the river to the Washington side, Malcolm swerved onto a side road and stopped. Ahead, the traffic had come to a standstill.

"Quick. Get out, Stan. Belinda, into the front seat."

Stan clambered outside and stumbled around to the back of the car, where Malcolm had opened up the trunk and was already removing suitcases.

"No questions. You have to get in here for a short while."

"But . . ."

"There's a checkpoint ahead. Get in!" Malcolm piled the suitcases into the back seat next to the girls.

Stan obeyed, and Malcolm closed the trunk. The next minutes lasted forever, and Stan was hot, claustrophobic, and scared out of his mind. The traffic crept forward, and Malcolm's voice addressed the Bridge of the Gods toll taker, and then there was the clanging of metal plates below the vehicle and the hum of the tires on the grill-steel surface of the road. Stan tried to imagine the beauty of the river in view when he and Mindy walked here years ago. At the end of the bridge where he and Mindy had bought honey, the vehicle halted. Stan heard a policeman's muffled voice, and the car began moving again and turned left. The car sped up and wound along the road for miles. Despite his normally rock-steady stomach, Stan began to feel nauseated. Finally, the car slowed and made a sharp right and began to climb. It stopped, and Stan heard the crunching of steps on gravel and the clink of keys. The trunk popped open and cooling fresh air flooded inside. Stan scrambled out and breathed gulps of air. He put a hand to the car to balance himself.

"Sorry, Stan. They checked our IDs. If you had been up front, they would have caught you. If I hadn't been a government agent, they'd have opened the trunk."

"I'm all right," Stan whispered, breathing heavily.

They had stopped at a park north of Beacon Rock. After returning to the highway, Malcolm drove straight to his home without further incident, other than a delay from traffic edging around the scene of a motorcycle accident. As they passed, Stan saw the rider, attended by emergency medical people, lying on his back on the ground. Stan thought of his uncle who had died in such a wreck and wondered what would become of the '48 Chevy Fleetmaster his uncle had given him.

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Malcolm's home was set in a dense neighborhood of elaborately landscaped houses overlooking a lake. Tall, broken-topped Douglas Firs grew in patches all around, and across the lake, mirrored in the water and framed by acres of younger trees, was a red house in an architectural style with a round tower that Stan thought, as he looked out from the high deck, would have been better situated in downtown Portland.

From behind him, Malcolm said, "It's odd. This property and that house once belonged to a man in the group of entrepreneurs who logged this region early in the previous century—the same group of which Mollicoat was a member. There was a collection of interesting buildings here once, amid virgin timber. Huge trees. The family's name was Leadbetter. The lake is polluted."

At night, after a gorgeous meal of wine-marinated broiled chicken topped with mushrooms, and steamed broccoli, prepared by Belinda and the girls, they discussed again what Stan should do next. Other than to search for information about his family, and if that did not lead anywhere, to head north and try to cross into Canada on foot, Stan was not committal or specific. Ever since he had learned about the bombing, he had been in a condition of mind such that he could make decisions only when forced. He said he would "figure it out tomorrow." At the Williamses' home, he was able to put his trouble aside momentarily, and he slept deeply for a few hours.

The next morning before breakfast, Stan walked along the trail beside the lake for exercise.

Soon after eating, the children gave Stan a hug, and Malcolm bade his family farewell. "I'll return in three or four days. I'm

at Stan's disposal. I love you," was all he said, and he and Stan left in Malcolm's truck-like SUV.

Stan was sad to leave this home, its comforts, and the company of the children. It might be a long time before he slept in a house again. First stop, he said, was to be the residence of his former pastor, Fr. Schmidt, to see what he might learn about his own family. They took back roads again and when they arrived, Malcolm went to the door.

Neither Schmidt nor anyone was home.

Malcolm next called the church office from an old telephone booth outside of a nearby bulk foods store. No answer. He returned to where Stan waited in the SUV and said, "It would be dangerous to hang around waiting. Schmidt might never come. He may have been arrested."

"How can I hear about my children?" Stan asked.

"You can't."

"We should go by the Sterne home here in Vancouver. It's only a few miles away."

"Absolutely not. They'll be watching it. They might be watching us now."

Stan sighed and refrained from looking around. Though he hated not knowing about Maxy and Chrysanthe, he said, sounding resigned, "The best course probably is to go into hiding right away." Which meant trying to walk across the border into Canada and make contact with certain people in east-central British Columbia. To do this, he would have to backpack, but Stan had little cash, using his credit card was absurd, and he had no suitable equipment.

Malcolm had a ready solution. "I knew you would have to take to the wilderness, and I've robbed our emergency fund, so let's go."

They began driving north. Stan stared from the window at the flashing scenery and did not speak or think. Two hours later in Seattle, Malcolm stopped at a gas station, searched through a telephone book, and called for directions to a large outdoor equipment store. When he returned to the vehicle, he rummaged in a briefcase for pen and paper, and said, "Stan, I want you to have the best tools available, and price isn't a factor. It'll ease my conscience a smidgen. Let's start a list."

The store was a warehouse and it had almost everything Stan needed. Purely from the perspective of a backpacking enthusiast, the shopping spree would have been blissful under better circumstances. With Malcolm's assistance, Stan picked out a down sleeping bag, an ultralight tarp, a tiny camp stove, new European-made boots, and a complete set of high-tech clothing and raingear, wool socks, a headlamp, extra batteries, a water filter, sunscreen, a compass, maps, crampons, an ice ax, and a dozen other essential and nonessential items. Stan read appropriate pages in the guidebooks for the mountains. They loaded up on dehydrated food, enough for several weeks, which was more food than Stan could carry. It took three hours to select everything.

"All this should get you across the border, and then some," Malcolm said. "Are you sure you want to follow this option? I might be able to hide you in my home or someplace nearby. We can go back."

"Thanks. But I'd get you into trouble."

Malcolm let the subject drop.

In Bellingham, they stopped at a hunter supply store and picked up a quality camouflage poncho and fuel alcohol, and they checked into the same motel where Mindy and Stan had spent their last honeymoon night.

With all the gear spread out on the bed, Stan stuffed his backpack. Despite intending to go as light as possible, the pack was painfully heavy, and he selected items to leave behind. While Stan did this, Malcolm packed extra food into a rubberized duffel bag.

Stan took his wallet containing his driver's license, library card, and other things, and pulled out each item and tossed it on the bed. "I'll take those," Malcolm said.

Stan motioned to the meager, forlorn collection. "Get rid of them, will you?"

Malcolm lifted up a photograph of Mindy and the children and held it out to Stan, saying, "Keep this."

"It might give away my identity."

"You'll need it to remind yourself who you are. You're wearing your wedding ring?"

"Around my neck on a cord."

"Good."

Stan also kept his wool sweater, the one Mindy knitted. He had taken it to Utah as his one warm garment, thinking he might have a chance to get into the Wasatch Mountains, never dreaming he would need it in the North Cascades. Rather than packing his travel Bible, he carefully tore out a section of the Psalms and gave the rest of the volume to Malcolm, to "dispose of reverently," he said. After the continental breakfast in which Stan gorged himself—his last civilization meal—they drove east.

Eventually, they reached a fork in the road. To the right, the main highway wound high up to a tourist viewpoint where it stopped. Instead, they turned left onto a gravel road that ran northeast of Mt. Shuksan until it dead-ended, and Stan wanted to get out early at a certain place, one he had been thinking about since Mindy disappeared—the foot of Goat Mountain. Malcolm pulled over at a wider place near a Forest Service trailhead marker and switched off the engine.

The men sat still.

"I'll walk north from here," Stan said. "But first I have to stay a while on the mountain. I promised my wife that if the worst happened, and if we were ever separated, we'd meet at a campsite where we spent glorious days of our honeymoon. I'm going to stay there for a while, in case . . . there's a miracle."

"Okay."

Malcolm didn't say more and Stan asked, "What will you do?"

"I've been running on adrenaline. I'll have to see when I return to the office. They might arrest me, or they might not know what I've done. I can't hide."

"Stay within the Government in Power, the GiP, and work from the inside," Stan said.

"I'll see. What work?"

Stan thought for a moment, then said, "Watch, listen, wait. Maybe it's all you can do."

"At least I'll learn about your family and I'll help them. I promise you."

"You will? Good! If anyone's alive. Thank you. I can't say how thankful I am."

The men climbed from the SUV, and Malcolm carried the bag of extra food into the woods below the road and cached it into a

hastily dug hole, “Just in case you stay on the border awhile,” Malcolm said. He and Stan piled creek boulders on top and returned to the vehicle.

Holding out both hands, Malcolm offered Stan a handgun in a leather holster and a box of ammunition, saying, “This is my personal weapon, an extra. Take it.”

“I have enough weight; I need stealth and speed.”

Malcolm held out a gray-green bundle of cash. “Take this then.”

Stan did, mumbling awkward thanks.

From the tree lined bank up the steps that were the beginning of the trail, he watched Malcolm back his SUV while turning and pull forward while turning. Malcolm performed this maneuver several times to reverse directions on the narrow gravel road. Stan still watched while Malcolm waved once and drove away. After swinging his heavy pack to his right shoulder, and fitting his other shoulder under the strap, Stan fastened his hip belt and began trudging up the path that led through the dark, tall forest, retracing his and Mindy’s footsteps.

***Evergreen Air Museum in McMinnville, OR.***

*There is a decrepit gray building looking directly to the ocean. From inside, I walk towards the beach and have to push through a series of wide swinging double doors that have heavy glass in them. The doors are set in concrete walls, placed only 10 feet apart. When I come outside, I see an island not far offshore, a resplendent island with a mountain. The island had once been a nuclear test site and the building had been for observation. One wave crashes in powerfully and rolls over my feet. My boots keep the water out. Some young women are happily bathing in the water and playing on the beach and I think they look intriguing. But when the girls come near me I see that they have repulsive red sores all over their bodies and they are disfigured from swimming in the radiated water. I am ashamed for my wandering eyes, and I pray for the girls.*

**–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons**

***In the North Cascades, possibly Goat Mountain.***

## Chapter 22
# Flee to the Mountains

When the trail climbed to a clear view, Stan rested, collapsing onto the ground without regard to its wetness from recent rain; and along with tiredness, the loneliness and despair pressed him down to the mud. Water seeped into his pants. The bright, crisp beauty of jagged rock, green trees, and a cloud-laced sky presented a mocking hell's imitation of paradise, an imitation of when Stan had been here with his bride on their honeymoon three years previously. It was a torment to be here alone without her, but this isolated location was his only hope of seeing her again (old reports saying that the brigands had moved north through the central part of the state), and his hope was more through imagination than reasoning. He yearned for her to be waiting in the tree cluster that walled a natural shelter higher up—their bower. Or that he might find a note, or strands of hair she had combed out and which the birds had not gathered for nesting. Those thoughts encouraged him to heave up the backpack again and continue.

His body, now cool and stiff, seemed to drag on him backwards as he forced it forward. After more hard hours slogging up the trail, interspersed with rests, he reached their camping place and called out her name, and of course there was no answer, nothing but inarticulate wind hissing through the tree needles. A marmot whistled in the distance. Stan thrust away his imaginings, fought into the thick patch of trees, flung down his pack, and threw himself into the frenzied action of tying up a tarp, arranging his gear, filtering water, and cooking a meal. He made a pillow from folded extra clothing. Afterwards, utterly spent, he climbed into his sleeping bag and dissolved into sleep.

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The passing of minutes, hours, or days has no meaning in the wilderness when one is alone and has little to do but wait for a

human event likely never to occur. One day or one week is no different from two months, or a year, but for change of weather and seasons. Stan performed the scant chores necessary for survival, giving an infinitesimal relief to the monotony and the dead loneliness, but he hated that relief. He and depression were locked into an embrace. As if in a coma, he sat for hours, staring into vacancy, unfocused on the external world and oppressed by the crushing weight of gloom. Nights brought only temporary oblivion, chaotic dreams.

After days of this, the life in him began to assert itself over the mood of death. He began to awaken from the spiritual unconsciousness into which he had fallen. He looked around and could not easily tell how long he had been there. Obviously, it was still early autumn. Winter is always only a few thousand feet higher in this part of the country and could descend with short notice, but the weather had been mostly clear and not too cold so far. Because of losing wife, children, parents, and all he knew and loved, he had drunk the cup of despondency to the bottom, but he had not died. He did not cease to exist. All that had been had *not* been obliterated—had not become as if it never existed. He had lost so much, but not all was lost.

He began to eat better, and his body felt restless from inactivity and his growing energy. If he were to remain camped here, he would have to walk, and he began long off-trail hikes and explored the mountain within the range he could cover and return from in a day. By forcing his will to defy everything else that was in him, he overcame his sullen anger enough to begin speaking out loud to God.

He wandered across streaked snowfields, jumped tiny, steep, rushing creeks, traversed thick-grassed, flower-strewn slopes, and he climbed as high as possible, pulling himself up seemingly sheer cliffs by the trees imbedded in the rocks. He returned to camp short of reaching utter fatigue, always hoping that Mindy might be waiting, and every day his spirit and body grew stronger and better prepared for the present trials and those sure to come. Once he had attained his exploration goals, he cut back on walking, limiting himself to two or three hours each day, and he resumed lengthy sessions of inactivity, but by now his mind was at peace. His heart ached, but his thoughts had become

quiet. He learned to sit motionless, alert, listening and watching: his mind resting, thinking of nothing, but absorbing subtle and constant changes around him, such as the drift of the clouds and sounds of falling water, the fragrances of various breezes, the snap and rumble of breaking ice across the valley, the slow slipping of shadows under the sun, and if it were possible, the rotation of the planet and the whirling of the stars far beyond the protective atmosphere. Occasionally hikers passed nearby, and Stan heard them talking from afar, or caught a flash of movement before they came upon him, and he crept back into the cluster of trees and hid until they had gone by.

One overcast day on what was intended as a short outing, he heard voices below. He ducked into a thick clump of bushes as rain began falling. Carefully, he pulled on his camouflage poncho and sat on the ground. He could not risk opening the umbrella. Rain began to pour heavily as the bearers of the voices came into view through the leaves—four men in military uniforms carrying rifles: a U.S. border patrol. The men stood close to his clump of brush for several minutes, talking, but Stan could not understand their words because of the noise from the rain. Cold water dripped from the branches and soaked his shirt sleeves and ran in at the neck of the poncho. Stan sat motionless, hardly daring to blink. After awhile, the men stalked away up the mountain, but Stan could not be sure where they were—they still could be nearby. He put up the umbrella then, making no noise. Painful hour after hour passed, and the rain continued. Not until well after dark did Stan rise stiffly and venture sneaking from the hiding place. He returned to his dry shelter, crawled into his sleeping bag, and ate the food left from his day hike. The other food remained tied up and hidden in a tree—he was too exhausted to bring it down.

Days were hard, but during the nights he now dipped into pleasant dream and memory. He held his wife and played with the children, and in the morning he left them as most husbands do, to go off to work, which for him was observing the feral garden, the mountainous land, and the moving skyscape.

One day when he woke he knew that his hopes were becoming wearisome. "Mindy's not coming," he said out loud, "and probably never will, or can. I can't stay here forever," and he

decided he should try crossing into Canada. He cleaned the camp to leave no evidence of habitation, except he wrote a love letter for Mindy, which he sealed in a plastic bag and weighted down by a rock in the cluster of trees that had been his home.

After he reviewed the map and his charted course, he progressed northward. The days of walking had conditioned and hardened him, enough that he could go anywhere on foot with his pack, provided he did not try to cover too many miles or climb too high. His exploration of Goat Mountain had showed him he would not have to return down the maintained trail and around to the paved highway. That route would be easier and take him to the trailhead he wanted, but it would also consume more time and increase his exposure to capture.

When he climbed down from the open land and began struggling through the thick brush, after falling twice, he regretted not having gone around, but with necessary persistence, he eventually reached the gravel road he had been seeking. This road was so rough and eroded—paved with bathtub-sized boulders and deep ruts—as to be impassable to all but the most intrepid four-wheeling drivers who might not mind destroying their conveyances. The road skirted the first of two twin lakes, and here his foot-trail began. He climbed above the lakes and went off the trail to his left to make a camping place for the night where the ground was level. Here he filtered water from a small freshet, filling up his bottles.

There were a few other people who had hiked in and were camping, but they stayed lower down and closer to the lake. Stan longed to join them, but prudence dictated he not take such a risk, not until he needed help. Had anyone built a fire, he would have been tempted beyond resistance, but campfires were not allowed in the wilderness by the government—the GiP.

Stan left his camp long before daylight. Before noon, after creeping downwards through heavy timber, he reached a broken-down wooden shelter and the end of his washed-out, unmaintained trail. From here he would bushwhack the remaining two miles or so to the border. A well-worn path extended from the shelter "made by amateur miners," Stan supposed, from what he had read in a guidebook at the outfitter store, but from this juncture he wished to stay off any trails,

because border patrols might be watching. Stan worked farther down to a creek bordered by huge cedar trees and giant ferns, and here he decided to take a break. While he sat resting, his eyes followed up the massive soaring trunk of a tree before him. He thought about how the Heavenly Father had watered and nurtured the tree since it was only a seed, and not only this, but had given the tree strength to placidly grow huge and thrive, despite all the forces that could attack it—fire, drought, insects, disease, and man. "If God cared for this tree for hundreds of years, how much more will he care for me," Stan said aloud.

His break over, Stan waded the mind-numbing, painful waters of the creek barefooted and in his shorts. He re-dressed and went on. He slid and unched over numerous waist-high dead trees that lay at odd angles in his path, and he climbed away from the noise of the creek until the forest thinned.

Taking a compass bearing, he assured himself of northwest. He would be following the creek, but well above it, and he had to get close to the border before nightfall.

Progress was slow. There was no path of any sort, but he could see ahead clearly enough to avoid obstructing rockfalls or cliffs. The snow banks—what remained of them at this elevation—gave the easiest passage, but mostly he walked over short, pink-blooming heather and across luxuriant wet beds of mountain wildflowers. Occasionally he had to climb up or down a rocky bank. As it often happens, a person finds himself in the most sublime scenery when urgent matters prevent him from enjoying them. But Stan did enjoy them; every turn presented a new vista, and the most pleasurable aspect was the fresh smell of the air from the many species of subalpine flora. He did not really care what their official names were; he could name them without words.

Before it grew dark, he could see an ugly swath cut from the trees about half a mile ahead to his left—the international boundary between the U.S. and Canada, a line not swerving or varying off from the 49$^{th}$ parallel for over 1200 miles. He thought it unwise to cross the border while it was still light, so he glanced around for a camping site, walked back a few hundred yards, and settled into a cluster of trees.

Even after a brief, refreshing sleep, he found that hiking in the dark proved more tiring than he imagined. The low-intensity headlamp illuminated a small patch of ground before his feet, and the visible disk of the moon, more than three-quarters illuminated and hanging overhead eastward, offered a long view when it emerged from clouds and mist, but his lamp and the moon somehow stripped him of depth perception, and he kept lurching into holes stiff-legged or stumbling on stones. He once stepped on a slick, downhill-sloping dead branch and fell, bruising his ankle on a rock. Route finding also was difficult because the lamp near his eyes blinded him to anything not immediately in front. He had to turn the lamp off occasionally to note what features lay further ahead. He kept to his compass and prayed for protection.

Walking became easier by imperceptible increments, and Stan realized daylight had grown without him noticing. The border, which had been visible, was now nowhere in sight. Stan switched off his headlamp. Nothing appeared familiar, not even the standing monoliths of rock on the western horizon. He might be lost. "Maybe the compass is broken," he said.

Some hours later he stopped to rest and eat at a place where he had a scenic view. The sun shone warmly against his back and the ground was dry, cushioned, and comfortable. Soon he realized that he must have already crossed the border. This thought was a relief. "It was easier than I expected. Everything's fine." The maps he had of the Canadian side were not detailed like the U.S. maps, but he felt certain that he would hit a trail or a road eventually. He put on his wool sweater, leaned against his pack, and closed his eyes. His body relaxed and sleep covered him like a cozy blanket.

A dim, gentle pleasure stole back into his consciousness. He kept his eyes closed while his mind bloomed into alertness. He listened to the birds calling in the forest below. The wind drifted through the branches and over the shrubby turf around him, and a strong, musty odor touched his smell receptors. He could place the scent at a specific location in his head. It reminded him of snails—large, pungent snails he had found on an island in the middle of the Columbia—and he had baked them with butter and garlic in the shell. Or it reminded him of dirty dog. Some

largeness next to him sniffed and breathed. Stan felt the earthy, organic warmth on his face. He leisurely opened his eyes, and one yard away was the huge head of a brown bear staring at him. Stan was not afraid because he did not have time. He had been so completely relaxed, it was impossible to be afraid. He did not move. The bear seemed to have been there a long while and had not hurt him. But it was a precarious moment. Bears at this season of year don't have to be hungry to want to eat; they're storing fuel for winter.

Would a sudden movement make it attack defensively, or induce a predatory attack, thinking that Stan, the meal, might escape? While Stan was engaged in this life and death analysis, the bear lowered its head, backed up, turned, and walked away. Only then did Stan's heart rate jump and his lungs gasp for oxygen. The bear moved up the slopes to Stan's right and began grazing, nipping up blueberries. Consciously imposing calm, Stan rose up slowly, slipped into his backpack, and continued over the ground. When the bear was out of sight, Stan remembered its eyes. They were not hostile or angry—if anything, they expressed curiosity, maybe sympathy. Stan realized he might have seen a bear as bears see themselves—creatures struggling to overcome the difficulties of existence against a hostile world. "All the same," Stan said, "I'm going to start hanging my food in trees when I take a nap."

Charged with adrenaline after the bear encounter, Stan moved fast. In another mile he came across a faint track arising from the trees below and winding to the heights on his right. He turned left and began to descend, and as he went, the track grew more definite. In yet another mile he came upon what he thought was the same creek he had crossed the day before on the U.S. side. The creek was wider, and rushed along. In front of him was a rotted foot bridge that had caved in.

A well-worn path continued upstream on his side of the creek and downstream to the right on the opposite side. But the stream would be a beast to cross here. He would have to wade again. He pulled off his boots, and he noticed that a narrow trail continued downstream on his side. He put his boots back on and began following the footpath. In a few hundred laborious yards of climbing over dead tree trunks, and winding through the tight

spaces of upright dead tree limbs while he pushed his pack ahead, and after climbing down a rock face, letting his pack down on a rope, he came to another bridge and the unobstructed trail on his side. It would have been much easier to have crossed the creek at the collapsed bridge, and he laughed at the intrepid trailblazers who created the nearly impossible passage, and who, like him, had wished to avoid the cold water.

He marched down the well-used trail. Now he would be able to make distance. His hope was to locate a road indicated on his map. He would then follow this road at night, or in the woods beside it, for as long as he could until he would no longer encounter Canadian border patrol officers. Malcolm had said that the borders would be intensely monitored to catch anyone from the Assembly who might be fleeing, but here in the wilderness? "Because it might only mean increasing the patrol from one officer per fifty square miles to two officers," he said to himself.

By mid-afternoon he was worn out, but he wanted to press ahead because it gave him the best chance of running into a road early tomorrow. He walked until he felt sick and stopped to drink the remainder of the water he was carrying. He removed his boots, laid back on the ground with his backpack for a pillow, and ate a candy bar. "That feels better," he said after a few minutes. He was about to doze like he had earlier in the day, when he heard one loud war-whoop and another—a human voice hooting at a soprano frequency, like the call of a ringed-tail lemur. He awoke with an animal-like alertness. His impulse was to slip around whoever it was, but he needed information—a better map especially. He left his boots and pack behind, and stole toward the sound. He crept to the edge of the stream at a wide bend to the west where the late sun shone in. The whooping continued and he heard splashing. Two brown, pre-adolescent boys, both stark-naked, were standing midstream, wildly splashing each other with the frigid water. Maybe he could talk with them and learn more of his whereabouts. He stepped into the sunshine and walked along the gray smooth-stoned shore, pretending not to see the boys. The splashing and yelling stopped, and at the outside field of his vision he saw the boys scampering to the shore. He waited discreetly while they

pulled on their shorts, and then he came nearer. They did not run away, but watched him with mild curiosity and no shame.

"Hi," Stan said.

The boys came near him together, not speaking.

"I've been hiking cross-country. Can you tell me how far away a road is?"

One of the boys pointed downstream. "Back there."

"How far?"

"Not far from our camp."

"You're camping?"

"Yes, with his father," one boy said nodding to the other. "Hey. Where's your backpack?"

"I left it behind a ways. Thanks for the information. I'd better be leaving."

Stan began retracing his steps, but the boys followed him.

The one who had not yet spoken explained, "I want to see your pack. What kind is it?"

Stan told him the make and model as they walked up to it.

The boys looked it over, turning their heads from side to side, and nearly in unison they both exclaimed the up-to-date word for approval. Then, "Jinx, Jinx," they said, pushing at each other and laughing.

Stan hoisted his pack and began creeping down the trail, and the boys followed him.

The land here leveled and the trail widened, and Stan began seeing relics of a rundown campground. There were open rock fireplaces scattered around, mostly broken, and huge weathered picnic tables near each one. Stan ducked into an ancient algae-green outhouse, but was disappointed to find no toilet paper. Up forwards was the top of a green wall tent. Stan drew near this campsite, and through the brush hanging over the site's driveway he saw a man in a red plaid jacket sitting at a picnic table, smoking a cigarette and trying to tie gear onto a fishing line. An open beer bottle stood handy. Empties lay strewn on the ground. Stan nodded to the man and he nodded back, and Stan passed by, the boys still following him.

Stan walked a little farther, and reconsidering, turned around and returned to the entrance of the inhabited campsite. He took a few steps toward the man who had not looked up.

"Excuse me," Stan said. "Can you tell me the number of the road here?"

The man glanced up from his work and told him. It was not the road Stan had hoped for, but likely a tributary. The man was not inebriated, but he was decidedly foggy from the beer.

Stan said, "Thanks" and turned to leave.

The man grunted and added, "If you are going out by that road, you'd better have your identification in order."

"Why?"

"You're an American, right? I mean, U.S. citizen?"

"How did you know?"

"The road is patrolled, not just by the Canadian Royal Mounted Police, but a swarm of U.S. agents brought up from the south. They're looking for terrorists. You aren't a terrorist, are you? No?" The man took a glug of beer and said, "I didn't think so. So, if you don't have identification, you better not go out this way, that's all. They'll arrest you and you'll have wasted a chunk of your vacation. It's worse at the crossroads. I mean, this road is not busy, but the closer you get to the highway, the hotter. I've been coming up here for years and I've never seen it so hot. The border everywhere is tight, and not just in British Columbia. The whole bloody country in the past few days. If I were you, I would go back to the U.S. side."

The enigmatic, knowing way the man spoke gave Stan a sudden surge of hope. "You have not heard of . . . of the Organization, have you? Or the Assembly?"

"The what?"

"Never mind."

"You said Assembly? Wait. Yeah, I heard on the news. The Chinook Assembly. A new domestic terror group. That's what all the bother is with the police and the U.S. agents crawling about everywhere. You heard about it in the woods?"

"Before I left home."

"Oh."

"You have a car, right?" Stan asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Truck. The campground road is blocked a half mile lower. I use my wheelbarrow to cart our stuff."

"I wonder . . . if I might get a ride from you down to the highway? I can pay you."

The man looked up from his knot and eyed Stan with suspicion. "You've got a big pack, but you don't look like a drug runner. But, no, I'm sorry. I can't take you. I'll be in trouble. The U.S. agents told me when I came through their roadblock—they told me I'm to report any unusual persons. You understand. Sorry. Try hitchhiking. Someone will pick you up."

"Okay. I'm thinking about it. It's a long walk back across the border to civilization."

"You understand my situation, don't you?" the man asked.

"Yeah, no problem. I'll be fine. You don't mind if I sit over there in the next campsite and eat my dinner?"

"Go ahead. There's plenty of space. We do have that."

Stan retired to a picnic table upstream and unpacked some food under the curious, watching eyes of the boys. The final sunbeams flickered and danced on the noisy water in front of him. The air was growing cool. Stan brought out his stove and cooked a meal, and the boys went away. Soon there was orange light reflecting overhead in the trees and a cracking of woodfire emanating from the neighboring campsite. He worried that he should move elsewhere for more concealment, and after he ate and washed, Stan moved uphill away from the trail and set up his shelter in the darkness. He was falling down with tiredness.

Padding footsteps startled him out of his stupor. The boys.

"Would you like s'mores?" one of them asked.

Stan would have preferred to crawl into his sleeping bag, but he was starved for human contact; it would not hurt to stay awake a while longer.

The father, still sitting at the table, sipped beer between nodding sessions. A boy gave Stan a stick and a marshmallow, which Stan toasted neatly and pushed off between graham crackers over a flat piece of chocolate. He opened his mouth wide for a bite. Stan had not shaved since Mindy had disappeared, and his beard had made a decent showing. Unknown to him, melted marshmallow had squeezed out and now hung all over his lower face, and the boys laughed at this until Stan pulled the worst of it off, but not all, since water was

needed and Stan did not want to get up. The man put his head down and slept.

Stan was toasting two marshmallows together when he heard the rumble of an engine in the distance. He was assembling another s'more when he noticed a bright light at shoulder height, wobbling in their direction. Then there were two lights, one behind and lower than the other. He could see a brimmed gray hat behind the first light. He was caught off guard. It would be of no use to run.

"Good evening," a hard-edged, professionally friendly woman's voice called. The light beams shined in Stan's then the boy's faces for a few seconds and dropped to ground level. The father slept hard, his head resting on his arms. The woman, who was thin, and a silent man behind her were wearing gray uniforms that Stan did not recognize.

Stan stuffed the second s'more into his mouth, and gooey marshmallow and chocolate oozed out, dripped, and hung in his beard worse than before, but he did not try to pick it out or wipe it away.

"You have not seen any backpackers or strangers walking up here, have you?" the woman's voice asked. The boys shook their heads in synchronization and said "No," then, "Jinx, jinx," and laughed. Stan managed to mumble "No" along with them.

"Is that your father sleeping?"

One of the boys said, "He's drunk."

"Well, if you see northbound hikers, do please contact a police officer right away. There are dangerous people wandering in the mountains. We need everyone to help us find them, okay?"

The boys nodded and said they would help.

"Do you have a firearm with you?" the woman asked.

A boy said, "No."

"Good. By the way, sir . . ." The woman visibly cringed at the mess in Stan's beard. "This campground is deactivated. I'd hate to make you move this late, but you'll have to leave tomorrow morning. Here's a brochure on the open campgrounds in the area, and I suggest you find one, okay? Those are fee areas, remember."

With s'more still in his mouth, Stan mumbled, "Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

The Canadian park rangers—for Stan had figured out who they were—said goodnight. Stan mumbled them a goodnight back as they left, and then the boys began cackling at Stan's ridiculous appearance before the rangers. He smiled hard, and his eyes gleamed with humor. He was too tired to be afraid, or to think about how close he had come to being arrested. He said goodnight to the boys, walked the few yards to his camp, tried to wash out the marshmallow mess with a little drinking water, and crept into his sleeping bag without brushing his teeth.

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Stan woke while it was dark. This is how he slept in the woods—waking, sleeping, waking. He heard the echoing rumble of a vehicle over the sound of the rushing stream, the same as when they had been sitting around the campfire, and a high-powered searchlight panned overhead through the trees. The sound and the light passed on. Stan switched on his headlamp and got out the brochure the rangers had given him. The brochure had a detailed map of the area.

He felt fortunate not to have been apprehended thus far. He was strongly inclined to continue north to try to reach the contacts in British Columbia, but with the thoroughness of the patrols, it would be only a matter of time—and a short amount of time—before he was caught. And then, even if he didn't get caught, the people he sought might not be there. All he had was the name of a couple and their work address—a small grocery store doubling as a post office. It was a long way—hundreds of miles. There was no telling what their situation might be: they may not be capable of helping him reach a safe country. It might be a decision between hiding in Canada, where he would always be a stranger under scrutiny, or else hiding in his own country on home ground. He writhed in agony about the decision, not because of the anxiety and uncertainty, but because he knew the answer, and it left him a drifter with no purpose except surviving to every day's end, and making it to morning only to meet another day like the one before. He also revolted over the idea of turning back.

The final decision came down to this: if he went north he would encounter immediate danger, and if he returned up the

creek to the Washington side he would be safer for the moment. Perhaps he could find another place to cross, one less monitored, or he could wait until the fervor and vigilance relaxed. The long walk down had not been a complete waste, because he now had the map for this region. But he had to leave immediately; the Canadian park rangers, who certainly would not be as diligent as U.S. agents, might have told them about the people in the closed campground. Someone might return for a closer look.

Without climbing out of bed, he mentally rummaged through his pack for anything superfluous. He had thought when he reached a road in Canada he would discard his crampons and ice ax, but now he might need them. When he found what he sought, he put his hand out and unzipped two pockets, first removing a miniature flashlight, his spare, and next a plastic whistle. He dressed, trussed up his gear, and slipped back to the neighboring campsite. The fire had burned down to an orange glow. All three persons there were sleeping in the tent. There was no sound from inside but a rhythmic grumbling snore. Stan placed the items on the table as presents for the boys, each on a green leaf. He returned to his pack and saddling himself with it, moved back up the trail.

Hours later as he backtracked his steps of the day before, Stan paused for awhile high up on the slope. The earliest morning sun had first glowed upon the high peaks, but soon afterwards fog crept in and threatened to obliterate everything. As he rested, he heard from deep in the fog the faint, shrill blasts of a whistle—the whistle he had given the boys. Three sets of three—the universal distress call, tripled. It was too deliberate to be a game. Stan settled on the possible explanations: it was a warning to him, or a farewell, but he never found out for sure which one.

He made fast progress returning across the border, which he had passed two nights before. No evidence of patrols. Long before dark, he reached the place where he would have to climb down and cross the creek near the miners' shelter. He stopped and got out the map. If he continued following the creek off-trail, roughly southeast, in ten miles he would reach a well-established trail on a ridge tracking north and crossing into Canada at another place. He figured that with beating through

brush he could make no more than five miles a day, if he did not take a wrong turn. Nearly a dozen tributaries fed the main creek, and he could easily waste a day following one of them. At any fork it would be hard to know the correct branch. The other, much longer route—the one back across Goat Mountain—would take him closer to people because he would have one short stretch of open road on the other side before heading into wilderness again.

He decided to take the longer way around, not because he feared becoming lost—he was feeling comfortable about the wilderness challenges—but so that he might stay one more night at his and Mindy's camp on Goat Mountain. He could not bear the thought of missing this one more try, since it was no more difficult than the cross-country route. And then there was food at the cache. He had forgotten. If he went cross-country now further up the creek, he would leave the food behind, and he definitely would need it later.

He pushed on and camped again above the lakes. By noon on the following day, he stood outside the cluster of trees where he and Mindy had lived. There was no indication anyone had been here. He picked up the rock that covered the note. Mice had chewed through the plastic bag and eaten holes in the paper. Stan comforted himself by weeping, and then he chastised himself for such foolishness. Even so, after he strung his tarp, he rewrote the letter and placed it in another bag under a flat rock this time and built a cairn over the rock as a marker.

That evening, lying in his sleeping bag long before he was sleepy, doubts crept up. What if Malcolm had lied and the Mollicoat Estate had not been bombed? No, there was no hint of untruth in Malcolm. Nevertheless, Stan wished he had confirmed it for himself. He wished he had gone to the Sternes' Columbia River home. No! It was no good rethinking this! He had to trust that his children were safe. He had to have a child's trust that all was as well as possible, or he would go insane. He shook loose from morbid thoughts and evaluated his immediate situation. He had eaten eleven days of food and had not gained ground, but he was far more fit physically. He could replenish his food supply with the cache Malcolm left, if it was still there. As he sat up and packed away his gear for the night, he held

several pieces of it for lingering moments. These things—his water filter, his pocketknife, his compass, and the rest—had become his companions and servants. He nestled into his sleeping bag satisfied with his plan for tomorrow.

It rained all night.

In the morning he hiked three hours down the trail and found the food cache intact near where Malcolm had dropped him off, and he moved along the road without incident, since he ducked into the woods whenever the infrequent vehicle came by. The road deadended into the trail he sought. The place was crowded with parked vehicles that were empty but for car campers who were preparing for an early start tomorrow. He skirted through them and climbed the trail to a pass and looked around for a flat, hidden place without rocks or roots to camp. In a half hour of impatient skirmishing in that area, he found no place suitable. There was nothing to do but continue down the trail.

Soon he came to a fork in the trail, and here was an established campground just inside the boundary of the national park. The camp was inhabited by several groups. Stan hoped he could sneak by unnoticed, but he was tired. He needed to find a safe place before dark. Avoiding contact with people, he walked around the perimeter of the campground. It was fairly flat. He followed a footpath south a ways until it faded. He picked a tree at the edge of view on a small rise, and when he reached it, looked down on the other side.

"Rats!" he said.

What he saw was a group camping under trees not far away. He wondered if he should try to stay here anyway. Maybe he could talk with them. Through the trees he spied four figures moving around their green and brown shelters. He heard the tapping of a spoon on a pan and the hissing of a stove. One pack had been pulled up by a rope onto an overhanging tree branch. "They probably don't want company," he said. Stan heard the thumping of boots behind him. His impulse was to hide, but it was too late.

Stan wheeled around. A fellow of about his own age and height, but with bushy dark eyebrows and a stubbly black beard, glared at him. He was wearing a long-sleeved pullover and baggy, dark green canvas shorts and was carrying a roll of toilet

paper in his hand. He waved at the smudge cloud of gnats that followed him and wordlessly walked past Stan, letting go of a branch, which slapped Stan in the chest. The man clumped down to the camp.

"Not much of a welcome," Stan said.

He glanced around to see if any ground nearby presented a place to sleep. Daylight was quickly passing away and Stan needed to settle down soon. He walked upslope about twenty yards to the right of his path and found a circle of conifer trees that was clear underneath. He unrolled his pad and sleeping bag, ate some dry food, drained a water bottle, read the Psalms awhile, and fell into a delicious sleep.

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When he awoke, the sky was light, and he smelled food.

"Will you join us for breakfast?"

Stan rolled over and saw the man whose voice it was. The person's approach must have awakened him. Unlike the fellow from the night before, he had long blonde hair tied up in randomly ordered braids. He was taller than average and large-framed. This guy did not exactly smile, but wore a bemused expression. Stan rolled back to his other side, saying nothing.

"As long as you're here," the guy said, "join us for breakfast, if you want. If not, it makes no difference to me."

He quietly walked away.

Stan got out, found a tree to relieve himself behind, bundled up his gear, and with plastic bowl and spoon in hand, climbed down to the group's camp. No one said anything, but the dark-browed fellow took Stan's bowl and filled it with a mixture of cooked oatmeal and coarse grains, topped with a chunk of white cheese.

While he ate, Stan observed the people to learn what he could. He had been nearly correct in his guess of their number. He counted three men, two in their twenties, and one in his early thirties, and two women who were about the same ages as the twenty-and-some men, but on the younger side. The people spoke little, and Stan thought they had an understanding: either they had agreed to speak no oftener than required, or else they had spoken so much already that there was little more to say.

The man with whom Stan had had no interaction thus far was thin and wore a black insect net on his head against mosquitoes and the tiny swarming flies. One of the women was strong-boned, sunburnt, and cheerful in her movements, and she strode around the camp with a jaunty air. Stan guessed from her facial and bone structure that she was the sister of the man who had invited him to eat. The other woman was small, tanned, and demure, with her black hair pulled close to her head and braided singly to the side with some leaves woven into the braid. The people had finished breaking camp before Stan completed his meal, and he thought they would leave him, but strangely they stood around as if they were waiting. Stan did not hurry, and by their body language Stan knew, but without understanding why, that this irritated them, especially the dark-browed fellow.

Finally, the blonde-braided guy, wearing his backpack and holding a long, flat, rubber-tipped walking stick, said, "Well, aren't you coming?"

Stan was deliberately not helpful, feeling annoyed with the lack of communication and their demand upon him.

"Why? Should I?"

"It's up to you," the blonde fellow said.

"Where are you going?"

The five people all glanced toward each other in exasperation. One of the women, the sister, said, "We should leave him. He will slow us down anyway."

"Okay, this is your last chance," said the braided guy. "Walk with us now, or we abandon you. You won't find us again."

Something was amiss. Stan swished out his bowl with drinking water, drank the dishwater, packed the bottle and bowl, and stood up.

"You want me to go with you, right?"

"No!" voices cried in unison.

Stan was crushed, though he did not know why he should be. This situation was impossibly confusing. "Let me start over. Were you expecting someone to meet you here?"

"Duh!"

Stan ignored this and continued, "And you think I'm the person you expected? If so, I'm not. I was looking for a place to sleep last night and wandered onto your camp."

There was a moment's hesitation.

"You're not Ion?" the smaller, demure girl said.

"What?"

"Is your name Ion?"

"No."

All five of them again looked around at each other for an instant, and then they all burst out laughing. They laughed and laughed, and the dark-browed fellow sat on the ground gasping for breath. The thin guy's laugh squeaked, which made them all laugh harder. The smaller girl sneezed loudly and sneezed again, and they became silent.

The braided fellow wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I'm sorry. We've mistaken you for someone else since Robert saw you last night. I guess we owe you an explanation."

He dropped his pack on the ground and sat on it, holding his long stick across his knees. "An acquaintance of ours, Sunshower, badly bruised her thigh on a slope a month ago. A grapefruit-sized stone came bounding down a mountainside and hit her. She has a friend, who nobody's met. His name is Ion. Sunshower invited Ion to join us for this last expedition—the last of the season before we go back to school or take up winter jobs. Ion was to find us. He was supposed to connect with us the day before yesterday at the latest—Monday. None of this would have been a problem, except Ion is a primordial jerk. He emailed us junk, and it contained a virus that destroyed my computer. We've learned since that he's been on other wilderness expeditions, and his attitudes do not fit our ethos, but it was too late to tell him not to come, and my computer didn't work, and I didn't have a phone number."

"He's an erratic electron," the black-browed fellow said.

The braided fellow continued. "Ion failed to appear, and we waited in this camp an extra day. That's why we were hateful."

"That's understandable." Stan's thoughts turned on his need for company. "What *are* your ethics . . . ethos?"

The braided fellow did not mind answering. "We're climbers. Not so much into climbing as living in the wilderness. Rather than conquering peaks, we come into the mountains to live. We stay as high as possible, in elevation, I mean, and blend with the

natural world. We listen to sounds of nature and avoid other humans. We try not to be noticed. My name is Coyote."

Without any signal, the group members lifted their packs and snapped their hip belts. A couple of them began walking away.

"I was wondering where you're going, and if I might join you?" Stan said.

The braided fellow, Coyote, said "Wait" to the others. To Stan, "You want to join us?"

"Maybe."

"Hmm. What experience do you have living outdoors?"

Stan told about the past week, and summers he spent camping at the beach or south of Mt. St. Helens with his family when he was a boy. He told of being in a hiking club and of climbing Mt. Adams with the Sterne sons.

Coyote cast his pack down again, and the others did so, too. Stan interested them now.

"Show me your gear and food. All of it."

Stan took everything from his pack, heaping it in a pile.

"You don't have a helmet," Coyote said. "You won't need the blue bags for hauling poop. Otherwise, you have good stuff."

"Let's leave him while we can get away." It was Dark-Brow.

No one moved.

Stan began re-stowing his gear.

"What do you think?" Coyote surveyed the circle. Everyone nodded in approval except for Dark-Brow, who said, "I abstain. But if the consensus is for him, he should have a trial period before we get far off-trail."

"Fair enough," Coyote said. "There's another issue. You have to promise to stay with us, or keep our route a secret. We don't carry permits and we avoid park rangers."

"Keeping your secret won't be a problem," Stan answered quietly. "And as for staying with you, I'll do my best, if we're traveling in the same direction."

Coyote began twirling his long walking stick. "We'll teach you what you can learn. We're headed east."

"Okay. You have my promise."

"We're crossing Mt. Redoubt, Mt. Spickard, Custer Ridge, and then dropping to Ross Lake, where we hope to get a boat ride to a van we have waiting. Can you handle this?"

Stan felt a thrill of fear. Ice covered mountains? Crevasses? "I don't know," he said.

"I don't know if we can either. But all of us have done this kind of climb before and lived."

"Can . . . can I drop out anytime?"

"I wouldn't advise leaving our company when we're on a glacier. Alright. Let me introduce you." He held his hand out to the large-framed girl. "This is Aurora, my sister, so named because her personality lights up a dark psyche. Next is Pennyroyal. She uses the odiferous plant Mountain Pennyroyal as an insect repellent. It's wonderful and hides the fact that she, and the rest of us, smells like skunk after a few bathless days. But I like the perfume of skunk. We call her Penny, and her dark beauty comes from Native American ancestry. And your bushy eyebrowed adversary next to me here is called Argillite. He enjoys rocks and minerals and collects stone carvings. His city name is Robert. Next, over there, Squamata, and I'll let him tell you how he came by his name, if he likes. Don't be fooled by his scrawny appearance. By far he's the strongest member of our group, but he hates bugs. My name is Coyote because I am, like the legendary Coyote of the Northwest Original Peoples, a master of earth and mischief maker."

Stan was thinking what name he should give for himself. When they waited for him to tell them, Argillite said, "I have one for our neophyte. Pyrite."

"Why?" Coyote asked.

"He looks genuine, but maybe he's false."

"False?"

"Not real gold."

"We shall see," Coyote said to dismiss the subject.

Stan was grateful that they did not want to know his real name.

Coyote came closer to Stan and said, "Let me see your pack, loaded. Put it all back in."

Stan hastily completed replacing the pack's contents and gave it to Coyote, who hefted it, feeling the weight. He set it down, went to the pack of Squamata, who gazed steadily into Stan's eyes, inducing him to shudder, and Coyote removed a coil of rope and tossed it to Stan. "This will help equalize."

They moved quickly down the trail. Stan had a hard time keeping up and dropped behind. They waited twice for him to catch up and then put him in the lead to set the pace. Stan expected them to tailgate, but they respectfully strung out behind him, ten yards between each person. Being in front helped him move faster. There was no talking for an hour, and they made good headway down the sloping trail that paralleled a noisy creek. They passed a campsite and only three people were there.

"Short break," called Coyote some time later, and they stepped off the trail through a fern patch and sat in the shade. Argillite rested on his back on a pad and put his feet on his pack. Squamata separated himself from the others and hand rolled a cigarette. The girls wandered into the trees in different directions. Coyote got out a bag of trail mix and handed it around, and then stretched out on a leafy place, as did Stan. The girls returned. The sweat soaking Stan's shirt was cold. He felt as if he could take a nap. Before Stan fully relaxed, Coyote stood up and said, "A' we weddy to wumbo?" Everyone seemed to be stiff and lethargic, but they only grumped to themselves and got back on the trail. In a while, Stan began feeling strong, and he pushed hard down the trail. Aurora, who was behind him, said at one point, "This is a good speed." More than an hour passed. The trail crossed the creek and everyone pressed forward. After awhile, Aurora and the rest had fallen behind. He came to another, larger creek, and not far on the other side, he reached a trail intersection where a direction sign lay, gray-weathered, on the ground. Canada was to the left. Stan wanted a break and found a soft, leaf-litter place beside the trail, gratefully lowered his pack, and sank down beside it. He ate some nuts and took a drink. As he was removing the map from a backpack pocket, he heard voices ahead from downstream. He closed his eyes, hoping whoever it was would pass by without paying attention to him.

They did not pass.

"Good morning, sir, how are you?" It was two park rangers, U. S. park rangers armed with pistols in holsters. They had a dog with them on a leash.

"I'm fine. Thank you. It's a beautiful day." Stan spoke at full volume so the others might hear before they stumbled upon the rangers.

"That it is," a ranger said. "You have been camping overnight in the park, I take it."

"Yes."

"May I see your backcountry permit?"

"A permit? Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't know you had to have a permit until I was already into the park. Someone I met mentioned it this morning."

"You didn't catch the notices? Permits help us manage the human impact upon the park. They educate park users. May I see your identification?"

"I don't have any."

"You don't have a driver's license?"

"No, I'm sorry. I don't have it with me."

"Not anything? A credit card?"

"No, sir. I'm going light."

"May I ask how you traveled here?"

"I was dropped off by a friend."

The rangers looked at each other. One took a step back and swiftly drew his gun and said, "Please move away from your pack and keep your hands where I can see them."

The other ranger led the dog to Stan's pack, and the excited animal sniffed it over. When he had his fill, he sat down and looked up at his handler who said, "It's clean. No drugs or gunpowder. You don't have a firearm?"

"No."

"Are you alone?"

"Looks like it."

"Do you have cash?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, we have to write a citation. It will cost $120. You can pay now, or we will take you into custody. If we evacuate you, expect to pay for the helicopter ride, too. Expensive."

Stan paused, as if thinking, then said, "I'll pay the fine now."

He would only give the rangers the name Pyrite, and they were annoyed, but they wrote out his citation and a receipt for $120 and put Pyrite on it—no address. They put the money in an

envelope and sealed it, then put the envelope into a cash pouch. "Send a copy of the receipt to the address on the back. It's a federal magistrate's office. They'll give you a $30 gift certificate for an outfitter's store. It's a rebate for helping us stay honest." The ranger was writing as he spoke. "And here's your permit. It's free. Next time you camp in the park, get one beforehand. How long will you be staying?"

"About a week."

"I'll put down eight days."

Stan took the permit and folded it into his shirt pocket. "That's a beautiful dog. What breed is it?"

"He's a Belgian Malinois. Don't pet him, please. The permit attaches to your tent."

The rangers wished him well and moved up the trail, but one stopped as if he had recalled something. He turned and asked, "You haven't seen any suspicious characters, have you?"

"No. Why?"

"Domestic terrorists might be trying to escape across the border. Just be careful, okay? Be sure to hang your food."

The rangers continued up the trail south.

Stan sat down and suddenly felt nervous. In a few minutes the others cautiously emerged from the western trail.

"You handled that well," Coyote said, smiling. "Thanks."

"Yeah, thanks," the others chimed in.

"We'll make the fine up to you later. Let me see the permit."

Stan showed it to him. Coyote took it in hand and asked, "Who's got a pen?"

Penny did, and he changed the number "One" where the form asked for "Number in Party" into "Six" and gave it back to Stan, saying, "You keep it."

Stan sensed that the group had come nearer to accepting him.

Fearing the park rangers might return, they did not rest here, but Coyote said he wanted to investigate a matter, and everyone followed him along the north fork of the trail. In a few minutes he turned from the trail, and once they were well out of sight of it, he dropped his pack.

"If I find what I'm looking for, I'll collect you."

Penny went along with him, and after a drink of water and another handful of nuts, Stan leisurely followed through the thick

undergrowth in the direction of the creek. The others waited behind, sitting on the ground. When he emerged at the creek's bouldery edge, he saw Coyote standing in the water downstream, in a shallow pool near a gravel bar, holding a squirming salmon in his hands.

That evening they camped in a bend of the creek, on the opposite side from the trail. Coyote caught two more fish while Stan washed out a shirt and socks. After dark, Aurora built a smokeless fire, starting with dry punk from the heart of a dead tree that Squamata pushed over, and they roasted and ate their fill of salmon. Penny told Stan these were Kokanee, the same species as Sockeye salmon, but landlocked, never able to reach the ocean. "When the water conditions are right in the fall," she said, "they make their way up from the Chilliwack Lake into this stream to spawn."

Everyone seemed quiet, and Coyote explained to Stan, "We're too near the trail. Our fishing and fire are technically illegal. Laws are made for those who need them; we travel harmonious with Nature, and she is pleased to support us."

Squamata ate a huge amount of salmon with great relish, licking his fingers and grunting with enjoyment. Everyone had stopped to watch him. He looked up and said sheepishly, "Pray for me," and suppressed laughter rolled around the circle.

Argillite noticed that Stan did not understand the humor and explained dryly, "He's a strict vegetarian, in principle."

Squamata poked another chunk into his mouth and mumbled, "Delicious . . . I'm serious. My mother will disinherit me."

"You all should eat as much salmon as you can," Coyote said. "We might have to live on stored fat before we see a grocery store again."

While they sat around the fire, Coyote told tales about how the Columbia River was made and how the Indians learned to catch salmon with fish traps. The main figure was the original Coyote, who taught the people and had the power to form natural geological features. "The first Coyote always gave his services in exchange for marriage to a beautiful daughter of the tribe he was visiting." Everyone listened with rapt attention. Away from civilization, the stories almost seemed believable.

Stan thought that inevitably Coyote and the rest would want to know about him—about his background and life—but he was surprised at their lack of curiosity. It was as if they had a rule about life outside the wilderness not mattering while they were here, as if the outside world existed merely in an irrelevant, remote past. Stan asked a question about what people did when not living on "expeditions like this."

Coyote seemed unwilling to talk about his life, though Penny said, "He teaches part time at a college, and in the summers he guides climbers up the high peaks in the Northwest or on Alaska treks. Aurora and I both attend the school where Coyote teaches." Penny made a vague allusion about her father being an administrator at the college.

Argillite proclaimed, "I never went to college, but studied geology on my own. I sell real estate—large parcels of land."

Squamata said, "I work in an art boutique in the city," though he did not say what city.

Beyond the one-line summaries, no one wished to elaborate. When they ought to have asked Stan the reciprocal question, there came a pause in the conversation. They deliberately were not asking. To soften the awkwardness, Penny asked Stan, "Where are you walking to, Pyrite?"

Stan answered, "To Canada."

Coyote gave Stan a piercing glance. "You're running to Canada?"

"Um, I'm walking."

"You shouldn't cross the border on this trail. Canadian police watch it like hawks."

Stan could not help but show disappointment.

"Don't worry. We're not going to turn you in. I don't know why you're running, but it doesn't matter. I don't want to know. We're all escaping from something."

Grateful for their discretion, Stan said, "I hoped to travel with you awhile and cross at a remote place."

"You're welcome to be with us," Coyote said, "but no place is safe to leave the U.S. now, if they're looking for you."

Argillite leaned closer to Stan. "You're welcome only if you blend with the group."

"He knows it already," Coyote said mildly, with a touch of rebuke. "The standard applies to everyone."

Stan was uncertain about what the sleeping arrangements would be. Squamata had set up one tarp for everyone—this was his chore and he was fast. Nobody said anything to Stan when he found a place for his own shelter, though there was room for him under theirs. They did not seem to think any explanation was necessary, and Stan felt relieved.

The next morning, when Stan went to the creek for water, he saw a brown bear catching and devouring salmon downstream at a small waterfall. Stan wondered if this was his friend from a few days before. He told the others about the bear, and they crept back to watch it wordlessly.

After hiding all traces of the fire, Coyote led the troupe south on the trail for about a mile, listening and searching as he went. At last he climbed a bank to the left and vanished in the trees. The others followed. They moved easily, making limited sound. The large standing trees thinned as they crept up, and soon they were into open subalpine territory. Argillite told Stan that Coyote had found an old Indian trail, one he had long suspected had been here. "We are entering the wilderness of the wilderness," Argillite whispered. They worked up the slopes and their bodies warmed from the exertion. It was hard going. Eventually, they progressed through a saddle between two peaks, dropped their packs, and scrambled up to the high, long ridge to the east. A mammoth glacier loomed to the south. Stan's feelings of awe were overwhelming. Ragged peaks stood behind peaks, and the sailing clouds and their chasing shadows spread to the distant horizons in every direction. On the ridge, the people wandered in private meditations. No one talked. Argillite examined the unusual red rock of these heights, and when satisfied, he sat and watched everything around him like it was a movie in a theater. Squamata, his insect net absent, sketched a plant nested in a rock bed. Standing off by himself, Coyote leaned on his walking stick, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply, and then he sat and read a tiny book he had removed from his pocket. The girls silently sat near one another. The natural power and beauty were too much for Stan to absorb. He observed it all, his mind quiet.

In time, the mundane aspects of life asserted themselves, and they had to descend.

On the north side of the saddle, they found a creek crashing down to a field by a tarn, where they camped. Stan estimated that they had covered four miles horizontally, not counting the side trip to the ridge, and it had taken up the entire day.

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Alone under his canopy that night, Stan unexpectedly felt obsessed with Aurora. He had watched her off and on throughout the previous day. She was not exactly his type, but she was a female in good health, and after his isolation, his natural yearning was asserting itself aggressively. He liked Penny, but she apparently had a commitment to Coyote. When he first met them, Stan had assumed Aurora had such a bond with either Squamata or Argillite, but the former showed no interest in her except as a buddy, and the other was so irritable that Stan suspected Argillite was jealous of Stan as potential competition. Stan knew instinctively that Aurora had few compunctions about sexual purity, and this played on his mind. He imagined creeping over to the group shelter and lying beside her to see what might happen, or inviting her to share his canopy, and the possibility that she might accept his invitation kept him awake, his heart racing, his senses alert. His thoughts endlessly repeated all the reasons why he could be excused for approaching her.

This could not go on and he made up his mind. He dragged his sleeping bag from under the tarp, and guided by his headlamp, he walked up the slopes to the saddle. He continued toward the ridge they had climbed the day before and soon sat down on a broad, flat rock. The moon had not yet risen in the sky. His thoughts turned to Mindy. He might never see her again, but he could not betray her. Nor could he hurt this poor girl, Aurora, by using her this way. Of course, there was the likely possibility that she would be insulted by his advance and repel it, and then he would be shamed as well as compromised. So far he had not spoken to these people about his former life and his family. He needed the group to know he was married and committed to his

wife for as long as she might be alive. He needed them holding him to account, by their knowing.

He grew cold. He wrapped his upper body in his sleeping bag and picked a path back down to the small lake and the camp. When he reached his canopy, he knelt and began crawling under it until he placed his hand on something thick and bone-hard, covered in soft sleeping bag. An ankle and foot.

"Hello, Pyrite," someone murmured sleepily.

It was Aurora. He jerked his hand away as if recoiling from searing heat; he stood up and backed away, frightened by his blazing, lurid thoughts. Her voice did not sound again. Stan turned and swiftly climbed back to the flat rock and found a narrow place behind it where there was turf. He spread his sleeping bag, climbed in, and covered his head, leaving himself a breathing hole. Having escaped the greatest danger he had met thus far, he fell into an exhausted sleep and did not mind the chill katabatic breeze that flowed from the ice slopes above and played about his face.

As daylight arrived, people began moving about the camp. Stan descended with his sleeping bag, and no one said anything regarding the musical-bed duet of the night before. Perhaps no one but Aurora knew or cared. Argillite's attitude toward Stan was no different. Stan determined to tell them about his background when they gathered in the breakfast circle.

When the moment came, resolution didn't make it easier; there was risk in every direction. Stan willed against his desire for security and spoke. "You know, I was a schoolteacher, of English, for three years. In a high school. I'm married and have two young children, and I love my wife and children very much, but I may never see them again. I wear my wedding ring around my neck on a chain. Here it is. It's a long story, but my wife was kidnapped on Mt. St. Helens at the end of July, many of my friends and in-laws and my parents were murdered, and my children were taken away by my sister to escape from some dangerous people. I think you've guessed that I'm hiding."

He removed the photograph of Mindy and the children from a ziplock bag that he kept in his backpack's side pocket and started it around. It came last to Squamata who said, "She's beautiful. Really . . . almost I—"

"Who are you hiding from?" Aurora asked, suspiciously.

"Evil humans, obviously," Squamata said.

"What did you do?" Aurora said, and Stan thought her hostility was provoked by her perception of being humiliated.

Coyote clucked his tongue. "You don't have to answer."

"That's okay," Stan said with sadness. "What did I do? Nothing. The kidnapping could have happened to anyone. It was horrible. A friend of ours was brutally raped and murdered by the same brigands, those who took my wife." Stan went into detail, and the others listened, making appropriate comments whenever Stan paused for remembering.

"The other events? They were because of the work of my in-laws," he concluded.

Showing a sudden, sympathetic change toward Stan, Argillite said, "There's more to this story than what you've told us. Maybe we can help you."

"You've helped already," Stan said. "But if you become more than my chance companions, you'll be targets. It's better that you don't know anything more." Stan hung his head, and Penny rose and stood behind him, massaging his neck.

"I have a son, somewhere," Coyote said.

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Over the next few days, they proceeded slowly, staying high above the deep timber, searching for the easiest way across this rugged country. Coyote reminded them that they only needed to cover a few miles a day to reach Ross Lake, where they would catch a boat to the van and get to college before classes began during the last week of September. Argillite and Squamata did not need to be back at their jobs this soon, so they were even less hurried. From the map Stan estimated they averaged three miles a day, which, under ordinary conditions, would be an elementary stroll for him. In this terrain, travel was hard, but by no means did the distance take up the daylight, or his strength. Even traversing a vast glacier and working up a steep ice chimney while roped and using anchors were easier than Stan had anticipated. It helped that they stopped beforehand and practiced self-arresting. To demonstrate, Argillite sat at the top of a steep ice and snow bank, lifted his feet, and began the slide. He held

his ice ax to his side and braked and steered by dragging it along and leaning. Then he flipped over to his stomach and jammed the pick of the ax into the snow, which brought him to a stop.

The group took every precaution, and they were patient with Stan's lack of knowledge of gear and techniques. They did not choose a particular tough route for the sake of overcoming it, but because it was necessary to reach their goal. Squamata took the lead, cutting steps in the ice and making technical route-finding decisions on the glaciers and the rock climbs.

They spent most of each day resting and watching the sky passing above them. Stan feasted on the images of the dark valleys slanting up to the emerald-green slopes cut by avalanche chutes. Over the top of the green layers stood gray and snow-tipped peaks that brushed against the blue and cloud firmament. Swirls of mist, like a young woman's lacy nightgown, alternately hid and revealed the sensuous, virginal earthly features in repose.

In this shared experience, Argillite's friendly change of heart toward Stan grew, while Aurora remained remote and observant.

One day the group climbed a rock pinnacle and Stan stayed behind because the climb was too hard for him.

Over the days, Stan's pack had speedily grown lighter. He thought that they were trying to reduce his load, but then he guessed that the group liked and relied upon his food more than their natural, organic stuff, because his was sweeter, saltier, and fattier, but this construct shattered when he lifted Argillite's pack down to him at a creek crossing where a snow bridge had collapsed, and he could not help noticing how light the pack was. Stan surreptitiously checked all the packs but Squamata's—Stan was leery of him—and discovered the truth: they were running out of food, and no one seemed to be worried. He mentioned it to Coyote, who only shrugged his shoulders. They also were low on cooking fuel.

One afternoon they camped on a soaring plateau overlooking an alpine lake, the largest body of water Stan had seen in the mountains thus far.

Coyote moved from person to person (except for Stan), seeming in consultation, and then announced, "Our site is too high for firewood, but we will not need to cook."

Everyone moaned in unison, which made them laugh. But for a few whole-grain crackers and dried fruits, they had no more food left. They passed around the crackers and ate these with scraps everyone dug out of their packs. The fruit would be saved for breakfast. Apart from the initial reaction, no one complained, and Stan bit his tongue from saying this was seriously poor planning.

The only concern was expressed when Coyote said, "The lake below us is to be our farthest point north. In fact, the border is less than a mile away over difficult cliffs and a ridge. If you're going north, Pyrite, this is the best place, maybe. But I don't recommend it, not only because we have no store-bought food."

In the timelessness of the former days in this wilderness, when he had been compelled to make only simple decisions of where to place his foot or hand, Stan had nearly given up thinking about the future. As was his habit, he gravitated to the easy course, which would be to continue with the group, though he knew they soon would be returning to the outside world and breaking up, and he would be adrift again. But this crisis of decision-making could wait until tomorrow.

The next morning they began moving down the verdant bordered creek that gushed from the lake. Except for glissading down snow banks on the side, descending was slow, and Stan felt his knees weakening. When the creek leveled out at three thousand feet below the lake, Coyote called for a halt and a search for a camping place. This was all the territory they had to cover for the day, since Ross Lake would be an easy day from there. While Squamata set up the shelters—both the group's and Stan's at the edge of a copse—Stan began picking and eating blueberries, which grew in clusters on the low-growing plants that had turned golden and scarlet with the approaching fall. Argillite and Squamata joined him; the girls walked down to a meadow and began digging with sticks. Coyote was not anywhere to be seen.

Stan had gathered nearly a gallon of berries when a shout rang off the trees. He looked all around, and his eye caught movement above him to the southeast—Coyote threading his way down the slope carrying a long lump across his shoulders.

As Coyote came nearer, the lump took the form of a light-brown animal that Stan recognized as a deer, likely a yearling.

Coyote had killed it with his walking stick, which, as Stan now understood, had been a longbow in disguise, his arrows having been stowed in his pack. Squamata built a fire, and Argillite assisted him in skinning the animal and cutting it up for cooking. Stan watched until he felt faint and nauseated from the blood and the warm smell of intestines and organs, and he had to go away and sit down. Coyote washed in the creek, and when he came back, he teased Squamata about being a vegetarian *and* butcher.

"Hey. I draw the line at fish," Squamata flung back at him. "They're cold blooded. And this animal is dead, so I can't hurt it more. But you're alive—you blood-sucking carnivores—and if you don't eat, I'll have to drag your half-dead carc-asses to the lake. So shut up." Then he whispered, "Please."

Coyote laughed and said, "Makes sense to me."

As the men prepared the venison, Penny and Aurora arrived with a bag of washed bulbs they had harvested. Penny said that the bulbs were "quamash" and had been a staple of the regional indigenous peoples. Stan knew this, the subject having been taught when he was in elementary school. The girls fashioned a pit at an uprooted tree near their camp. Where the roots had lifted up, there was a hole in the raw earth, which they dug out deeper, lined with rocks, and moved burning coals into. They got a hot fire going to make more red coals, and when the pit was right, they layered in grass and the bulbs they had flattened into cakes. Penny poured a small amount of water over the top and covered it all with several inches of soil.

As Stan watched, Penny looked up from her labor and said, "Breakfast for tomorrow."

"How do you tell between the edible quamash and the death camas?" Stan asked. "The edible has a blue flower and death camas is white. The flowers are gone."

"We can tell," is all she said.

The women next cooked the venison. Coyote cracked the deer skull and removed the brains, trimmed the fat from the hide, rubbed the brains into the hide, rolled the pelt into a bundle, and stuffed it into his backpack for further tanning when he arrived in the city. By now Stan felt much better and was given the

assignment of burying the feet and other inedibles. He dug out a shallow hole for the remains and piled stones on top of them.

When Stan returned, they dined, and the tender, roasted venison made the best meal of Stan's wilderness experience. Squamata only ate blueberries and said sulkily, "If bears can live on them and fish, I can."

When darkness fell, they sat around the campfire. This was to be their last evening; the following day they would hasten to Ross Lake. Tonight was a Wednesday night, as Argillite reminded them, jarring them into continuity with the outside world's calendar; the girls and Coyote had to start college classes on Monday. The girls said that they preferred to move into their quarters on Friday—Sunday at the latest. The realization that their wandering together was drawing to a close spurred Stan to explore his new friends' ideas. He remembered his days as a college student when he would challenge someone to a discussion, and while they argued at a public outdoor place on campus, a crowd occasionally gathered to listen. In the past few days, in his desperation and grief, he had grown to cherish these people who had accepted him without question. As he listened to the quiet, sporadic conversation, and as their musings turned to what came next, Stan began to think about their eternal destiny, and he wondered what meaning they attached to life.

In a long pause in the talking, he asked without introduction, "What happens after we die?"

The last thing Stan expected transpired: no one answered. They did not scoff. They did not mock him. They said nothing. Coyote put more wood on the fire.

Argillite broke the stretched silent moment by saying, "Nothing happens."

"What do you mean?" Stan asked.

"There's no substantive change," Argillite answered. The others seemed content to listen.

Stan asked, "What about the decay of the body and cessation of conscious thought?"

"We don't know about the cessation of conscious thought," Argillite said, "though I think it stops. There's no evidence that the mind lives after the body stops. How can the brain work

without biochemistry? Biophysics. The body rots, obviously, but that's nothing. All is nothing."

"How can you say this?" Stan said. "You live your life as if it has meaning, right? You love people and you take joy in the created world. Are you saying all the meaning you have put into your life comes to an end when you die?"

"No, I'm saying that life has no meaning at all, ever. No one's life does. All is an illusion. We pretend in a thousand ways that it has meaning—this pretense is what people call spirituality. And the more self-negating and self-sacrificing, unreal and unnatural, the more spiritual. I believe in the natural—what I can see, hear, smell and touch. Death is natural."

"How do you cope? How do you live from day to day? Are not humans, yourself included, fantastic misfits in the universe?"

"Yeah, we're misfits. Or mutations. I survive by sacrificing my need for meaning. I meditate in order to kill in me what's separate from nature. I learn not to care what happens, and I follow my instincts, like curiosity."

"But you still care?"

"I do. I care about being accepted by people I deem important. I'm annoyed with people who impinge upon my territory. I love money. I take pride in being different, strong, and healthy. And intelligent. I come to the wilderness to escape vanity, but even here I'm proud and selfish."

"But you're honest about it. That's good."

"It's dismal. I wish you hadn't mentioned the subject." Argillite fetched his sleeping bag and wrapped it around himself.

"But think for a moment," Stan said. "What if humans weren't genetic mutations, but rather only damaged? Seriously damaged, but repairable. What if all our best hopes and aspirations really had a place in the universe? "

"That'd be nice, but repairable by whom? Ourselves?"

"No, by our Creator."

"You mean God?"

"Yes," Stan answered simply.

"A crude word for an entity supposed to have made everything."

"You're right. Any word would be too crude. Unless that word was 'Person.'"

"What?" Argillite was confused. "What evidence is there a Creator exists?"

"The natural universe is evidence."

"Right. Cause and effect. The sun evaporates the sea. The wind blows the moist air over the land. The moisture condenses into rain and snow. The snow builds up on the slope, and when the weight increases it comes careening down as an avalanche, burying my best friend. No one found her body. Where's the meaning in that?"

Stan took a chance in ignoring the bitter sarcasm—his personal reference—that Argillite had hurled into the discussion, and said, "You yourself are the strongest evidence."

"How?"

"You know in your own mind that part of you is outside of the cause-and-effect universe. You have a will, and your mind recognizes its functioning. Sure, you're affected by outside influences, but there remains in you the ability to choose between one course of action and another, between one kind of food to eat and another, when to go to bed, whether or not to raise your right hand or left, what female you'll mate with. Nothing in this entire universe absolutely forces your will. And your mind, too, self-aware and distinct from all else in the universe, is evidence. And your ability to perform abstract reasoning, but most clearly your will, couldn't have come from a cause and effect universe. The quality of will must either be inherent in nature, or it must come from outside of nature. In a closed cause-and-effect, mechanical universe, nothing happens or is formed other than what's existed before in some form—a potential for having a quality or characteristic is a nascent form of that quality or characteristic. Only when we theorize that we were made in the image of an uncreated creator do those aspects of human nature such as will and reason and self-awareness make any sense."

Argillite said, "That's not exactly what evolutionary theory proposes. Aren't you ignoring a lot?"

"No," Stan said, "I'm not ignoring the complexity; I'm only simplifying the explanation."

Penny spoke up, saying, "Where did you get the ability to reason this way, Pyrite?"

The others remained silent and Stan continued. "Isaac Newton's first law of motion shows how this must be. 'Every object persists in its state of rest or uniform motion in a straight line unless compelled to change that state by forces impressed upon it.' Another way of describing it is inertia. A cause-and-effect, material/energy-only universe won't produce a person."

Argillite's hand in the air marked ideas building together in his head. "So, a structure made of concrete, like a building or a sculpture, could not have made itself, but shows evidence of a design—a blueprint—and external intelligence?"

"Exactly," Stan said. "And free will. Imagine the forms, the concrete forms that forced human beings and all of life into their existence out of inanimate matter and energy. Something did this, either the forms or a maker of the forms. It doesn't matter which, because there's a brilliance of mind someplace, so deep that we can not detect it with our senses."

Up until now, nearly all the others merely listened, but as Argillite paused to consider, Coyote said, "Pyrite is right. I believe the Earth is a living being—a Person. All things in nature carry an element of personhood because they are children of our mother Earth. We see it most clearly in humans, but also in the animal people, who help us and give us food. Behind all is the Creator, who is a person. He's not more spiritual or better than other people, but he has the role of Creator."

"There's a problem in your outlook," Stan said, "because even in a personal universe, if personhood is inherent in matter and energy, a uniformity of existence does not allow for a reality of good or evil. If all is one, and everything is part of one whole, then all is good, even cruelty, or else good and evil are meaningless terms."

"Legends do tell of a masculine Creator," Penny said, her first contribution in a while. "There's also a belief in some tribes in a Spirit who rules, but takes only diffused interest in world happenings."

"Let me tell you a story," Coyote said, and without waiting for anyone's consent he began. Argillite, Penny, Aurora, and Squamata listened intently, and encouraged by this, Coyote's telling transformed into a formal account of how the moon and sun came to be in the sky.

Stan leaned back and watched the sky, which was invisible except for an underbelly of rippling cloud textures.

This is what Coyote said:

"In the beginning, Raven's father said to him he would give him strength to make a world. Raven succeeded, but the world had no light. The darkness made it hard for the people to work, and they and Raven grew weary of this condition. He heard about a rich aristocrat who lived in the North who kept his own light. After another nasty crash into a tree, Raven grew angry. 'How dare that rich man keep the light from everyone else?' Raven cried with indignation. He flew north and perched in a high tree. Looking down, he saw that the rich chief kept the sun, moon, and the stars in boxes in his house, and he also saw the chief's beautiful daughter. When she came to the stream for water, Raven devised a plan. He thought, *I will make myself into a spruce needle.* He floated down the stream into the girl's basket. When she drank, she swallowed Raven unknowingly, and in this way he impregnated her with himself—Raven was immaculately conceived. The rich man wondered how his daughter became with child, but he patiently waited for her to tell him who the father was. When the time arrived for the baby who was Raven to come forth, the rich man's family dug a cave for the girl and lined it with comfortable furs, but the child refused to be born on these fine things. The rich man became sad and asked, 'Shall we make a bed of moss?' They put moss in the hole, and the baby was born, his eyes shining and looking around in every direction. He looked like a miniature copy of his grandfather, which pleased the old man.

"The grandfather loved the child and spoiled him. The child pulled the grandfather's mustache and rubbed mud on his fancy robes while he sat on his lap. He screamed at him when he did not serve him fast enough, and when he received his food he threw it on the floor. He laughed at his grandfather, and the old man merely griped while he cleaned up the messes. The only thing the grandfather didn't allow was for the child to touch the boxes that held the light. But the child crawled around on the ground of the house and cried and demanded to play with the boxes. This lasted for many days. The grandfather finally gave in and said, 'Let him have the box in the corner, or we shall have

no peace.' The child took the box and pushed it to and fro on the floor behind the backs of the people. Suddenly the child opened the box and released its contents up the smoke hole. Stars from the box flew up the hole and scattered in the sky into the constellations we see now.

"Months later the child began to cry again and the people thought he might die. At last the grandfather said, 'Give him the next box.' So they gave him the box, and he scooted it over the floor behind the back of his mother and released it up the smoke hole and there was the moon.

"The child began to cry for the remaining box, the one containing the sun. The child's eyes turned in his head, shining with many colors, and the people began to think he was not an ordinary baby. But the child kept on crying, and the grandfather loved his grandchild more than his own offspring and wanted him to have all that was good, and he said, 'Give him the last box!' They gave him the box, and when the child seized it, he produced the raven cry, *Ga!*, and flew up through the smoke hole with the sun. The grandfather said, 'That crapping Raven has stolen all my things.' When Raven flew up into the sky, the feathers on his head began to smoke and his beak grew hot. Before he flew up the smoke hole, Raven had been white, but now he is pitch-black."

In the orange of the firelight, Argillite nodded in appreciation of the story. Coyote stood up, stretched, and scanned the sky to the west. "A dark moon has already set tonight, but we can't see her through the clouds."

Stan had heard these kinds of tales before when he was a child in school and studied them in college—mythic accounts of the beginning of the world. Each tribe of the first peoples inhabiting the Northwest told different versions, and the tribes considered their tales to be communal property. None of the stories began at the beginning—always some creatures or people existed when the story itself commenced. Stan began to speak, but found he had to first clear his throat, and he said, "I wonder if I may give an interpretation of the legend."

"Go ahead," Coyote said agreeably and sat down on the ground before Penny, who was perched on a bench-like stone. She put her arms around his neck from behind.

"I know another story like this, but it connects with history," Stan said. "The darkness the people live in is spiritual darkness. A baby came to the world the same as Raven, through an immaculate conception by a young woman, to bring the light to the people, and he was the light. He was pure and white to begin with, and like Raven, he turned into darkness in the process of bringing us the light. As he lifted up into the sky, he began to glow with a new light and life."

"How does this connect with history?" Penny asked.

"Raven is Jesus of Nazareth."

"No!" Argillite, Aurora, and Squamata blurted out together in weird harmony.

"Just think about it," Stan said, persisting. "Jesus, the son of the Creator, was born to a virgin and was without fault of any kind, as Raven was white. Jesus died and descended into hell, as Raven went through the fire and out the sooty smoke hole, to pay for the evil of the world and every person—and he was raised from the dead and is the light of the world."

"There are differences between the stories of Raven and Jesus," Coyote said somberly.

"Yes, and I think the Creator put cultural metaphors, which the character of Raven is, within every tribe of people in the world, so they would be prepared when the story of the true Raven came to them. Those legends were incomplete and imperfect, but the germ of truth, or its reflection, was always preserved."

Stan saw an open door to speak plainly and asked, "May I have permission to tell this Raven story to you, the one which is historically verifiable?"

Squamata scoffed and stood up. "I've heard this one before."

"You don't have to listen," Coyote said. "Go ahead, Pyrite. You listened to me, so I can hear your tale, if it isn't too long."

"The Christian story simply conforms to a universal archetype," Argillite said, "and it too is a cultural myth."

"But," Stan said, "where did the archetype come from? What if the archetype is real?"

No one seemed to have an answer to these questions.

Stan launched into a narrative of the biblical creation account, of the history of Israel, and of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Stan spoke briefly about what Christ's followers did

after the resurrection. His telling took a few minutes less than Coyote's and copied his style, with pertinent quotes interspersed throughout the action.

A few paces from the fire, Squamata breathed a pointed sigh of relief when the story was over. Penny said, "I'd like to hear more about this, but not tonight. If this story is true, it answers many questions."

Squamata came toward the fire and deadpanned, "I believe in reincarnation. It answers my deepest questions."

"I believe in a woman's right to choose," Aurora said saucily, and a chorus of laughter broke out, but they did not all laugh. Stan and Penny did not, and neither did Argillite, who instead interjected, "Doesn't everyone?"

"What question does reincarnation answer for you?" Stan asked gently after the humor choked and subsided.

Squamata strode up to Stan, squatted beside him, glared into his face, and said fiercely, "How I got my name, asshole!"

Awkward silence followed this insult. Squamata paced around the camp while the others sat unmoving and gazed at the fire. Penny then got up and Stan could hear her and Squamata whispering near the common shelter. Penny returned and settled in front of Coyote, who began massaging her scalp with his fingertips. Subdued, Squamata returned to the fire some minutes later and said, "Sorry, everyone. Sorry, Pyrite."

Squamata then walked away and rolled up in his sleeping bag. The others sat around the fire.

Stan ventured to ask, "How did he get his name, anyway?"

"Squamata means reptile," Coyote said. "His own father called him a reptile. Squamata is proud of the name, but it bothers him, too. I'll say no more about this. Ask him yourself, if you dare."

They watched the dying fire, knowing that they must sleep soon. Their brief journey in the wilderness was nearly complete.

"What's next for you, Pyrite?" Coyote asked.

"I don't know. I thought about staying out here longer. I have money enough to buy supplies, if I can find a source."

"That'll be a problem unless you go near a town. But you can't live here through a winter without a cabin. You'd freeze to

death. I wouldn't try it with only a tarp for shelter for more than two weeks."

"Well . . ." Stan said.

"But I've had an idea for you," Coyote said. "I know a place farther east where you might overwinter. It's a communal farm. They used to welcome people to stay who worked. They'd feed you and give you a warm place to sleep. It was a long time ago. Its name is . . . I can't remember. Penny, what's the place near Spokane that Melon told us about?"

Penny, her hands resting on her knees and her head bowed sleepily said, "Tolstoy Community. They modeled their living on Gandhi's Tolstoy Farm in South Africa."

"I wonder . . ," Stan said. "When I read Tolstoy in college, I found out about a similar communal group that published books on peace issues, marriage, and ethics. They do their own bookbinding. They're fond of Tolstoy's short stories. Their communities were in the eastern United States, but they also had links to communes in the West. The western relations—*former* affiliates, I think—have their origins in the Protestant Reformation. I remember . . . I saw some maps in a book. There might be a community of them near Spokane. I wonder if this Tolstoy Community and the, the Hutterians, I think their name is—are the same?"

Coyote yawned and said, "I wouldn't know."

"It would be worth . . . looking into for a winter home," Penny said while standing up and imitating the exact notes of Coyote's yawn.

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Under the tarp in his sleeping bag, using the bottom of his backpack as a pillow, Stan considered his future. While he had grown stronger by living and traveling in the woods, he feared uncertainty. From all the signs, he knew it was dangerous now to cross into Canada again. If he could find a safe place to live through the winter months with people outside of the cultural current, he might try again in the spring, or summer. While his body rested, his mind remained wide awake, and he recalled details of a Leo Tolstoy story.

The story took place when the early Christians held their property in common and shared with each other. There were two friends, young men. One of them joined a community of Christians, and the other, whose name was Julius, remained in the mainstream of Roman life, seeking its successes and pleasures. In the course of their years, the men debated one another about what way of life was best: following Christ in self-sacrifice, or striving within the Roman culture for one's personal happiness under a government that managed the affairs of men with law and force. When Julius was old and his life nearly spent, and his wealth diminished by a son's extravagance, and after his wife died, he came to the realization that all this chasing had been a waste. He journeyed to the community. When Julius arrived there, he found his old friend, who welcomed him and said, "After a time observing our life in the community, you'll better know the work of service for which you're suited." His friend said that, meanwhile, he could work in the vineyards. However, Julius discovered that younger workers had taken all the better vines. The only work he could find was in old vines, unfit for anything but fuel, and Julius further lamented the fruitlessness of his own life.

But he was not alone—a gnarled, elderly man showed him that these vines still had some sweet bunches of grapes hidden, and said that while Julius had wasted his life heretofore, and while he was late in coming around to God's plan for him, he could count for something now. The elderly man said, "Work is joy." And Stan remembered the story's conclusion: Julius lived joyfully in the community for twenty more years and did not notice when death took his body.

Like a child in the arms of his mother, Stan felt a soothing warmth and peace envelop him as he fell asleep with thoughts of joining such a protective community.

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Stan awoke and did not know why. Though dim, day was breaking. Coyote's voice came to him, and by the tone, Stan realized Coyote was repeating himself. "We must travel a long way today. Time to get up."

Before he was fully alert, Stan sat up and began shoving gear into his pack. Squamata took down the group tarp. Argillite hid the coals and the blackened ends of firewood, scattered the ashes thinly in the woods, and raked up fir needles ready to cover the wound made by the heat and flame. Aurora and Penny dug up the cooked quamash cakes, and Aurora gave out chunks of roast venison. To Stan, the quamash tasted sweet, reminding him of canned pears. With Stan's help, Coyote filled and concealed the cooking pit. The remaining meat, which was raw, went into their packs. They set off down the creek without much talking, finishing breakfast as they walked.

In severe contrast to their careful movements of the past days, Stan could only describe the pace at which they moved that day as running. It was not easy with backpacks—half-empty, bobbing along behind—but they ran, having cinched the packs close to their bodies. Coyote led the way relentlessly, picking his way around obstacles, dodging branches, skipping over downed trees, and spurting forth whenever footing and density of forest permitted. They followed a trail that appeared and disappeared. Despite the chaotic movement and risk of falling on his face or breaking an ankle, Stan united with the rhythm, dodging and jumping along with the others, and exulted in his strength, agility, and fortitude. After an hour they stopped, and standing in a circle they drank their fill of water, grabbed a handful of blueberries, and ran on. In another hour they reached the lake—a long blue jewel running north and south, and framed behind by a mountain range unseen until now. Where the people emerged by the lake's edge was a designated camping site accessible by water, but no one else was there.

They stopped and drank again from water bottles, and Coyote peeled off his clothing, as did the others, except for Stan, and they plunged into the lake, splashing and rubbing off sweat and dirt—their first bath since they left the salmon river. When Stan had seen the women beginning to undress, he walked away from the camping site, and he kept on his boxer shorts when he crept into the water. He looked over once at the girls, who were not fully submerged, regretted his inquisitiveness, and afterwards kept his eyes away. The cold water and his immense feeling of wellbeing, but especially the cold water, helped him sublimate

his natural desire. He swam out on the lake as far as he dared and then returned on his back, looking up into the sky. After they all dressed, Stan returned, and they shared out the rest of their berries and quamash bulbs, and Squamata amazed everyone by producing mangled chocolate bars in their foil wraps.

"You rascal," Coyote cried. "Saving those all along?"

"I thought we'd celebrate." Suddenly, Squamata released a boisterous blast of intestinal air. He laughed unabashedly and said, "Quamash never agrees with me."

"That's quite a celebration," Argillite muttered.

Coyote took his chocolate in one hand and his outer shirt in the other and walked onto a point of rock jutting from the lakeside. Stan heard the sound of a motor far to his left, an alien intrusion to his ears, accustomed as they were to sounds only of nature and neo-primitive man. A boat skimmed into view and Coyote waved his shirt. The boat veered starboard and raced straight in their direction. It roared up and glided to a stop, rolling and bubbling in its wake, which washed against the shore.

"Can you take us to Ross Dam?" Coyote bawled to the boat's operator, a man wearing an olive-green hat strapped under his chin and a stylish outfitter's shirt.

"How many are there?" the man bawled back.

"Six, and our knapsacks."

"I'll take you for $30 each. I'm a private shuttle boat operator on the lake, and I let a party off further north this morning. $30 is a pretty good deal. Because I'm returning to my base anyway. How about it? Half my normal fare. You can come with me or wait here all day. Or walk."

Coyote came back to the others and said, "How about it? Does anyone have money?" Some said no and others shook their heads. Squamata said, "I left my wallet at home."

They all looked at Stan, who was already pulling a wad of bills from his packsack. He counted out the amount and gave it to Coyote, who smiled at him with beaming eyes. Argillite bounced on his toes and patted Stan on the back. "Thanks, friend. You saved us."

The boatman pulled his craft nearer to the edge of the land. Stan helped to hand the packs onto the boat in a fireline, and when he hefted Squamata's, it nearly pulled him over with the

weight. Stan looked at Squamata and said good-naturedly, "More hoarded food?" Squamata mock-scowled and Coyote said, "He's been carrying our heavy gear, haven't you noticed?"

They all boarded without mishap, except Coyote slipped off a rock in the shallows and soaked the inside of his boots.

The boat sped along breathtakingly, and the slow panning movement of the forests and the slower procession of the towering mountains above the lake added visual depth to the magnificence and majesty of the scenery. After nearly three weeks on foot, it was delightful to be sliding effortlessly along the glass surface of the water—such lavish indulgence to watch the shifting views overhead without worrying about tripping over a stone, root, or branch, or sliding on ice. Stan glanced around at his companions, their hair rippling back in the noisy, engine-induced breeze. They were enjoying their voyage, and yet he could see behind their faces that each one was concerned about what lay ahead in his or her life. Stan asked the boatman if he had a roadmap of Washington State, and the man dug around in a container and found one stained with machine grease. Penny touched the map with her finger where she thought the Tolstoy Community was located. The others were all going west on the highway that passed the lower end of the lake. Stan traced out the most direct route for himself.

The boatman waved his hand and yelled, "Keep it! I need a new one!"

Huddling from the wind, Stan studied the map, looking at the tiny portion of the Earth they had just crossed. For a fleeting instant, he yearned to continue crossing the wilderness—there was so much more untrammeled land to the east.

It was eighteen miles to the boatman's headquarters near a resort, which was not far from where Argillite's Volkswagen van was parked. As is everything grand and unforgettable, the boat journey was soon over. The boatman fed them from his refrigerator at no extra charge, helped load the group's gear into the back of his pickup, and delivered them to the van. When the moment arrived for the people to leave Stan and return to their city lives, they stood around, not knowing how to part company.

Finally, Coyote said, "Okay, group hug," and they all surrounded Stan and embraced him tightly.

Tears filled Stan's eyes, and he let them flood over and did not try to wipe them away. All but Penny and Argillite climbed into the van and made themselves comfortable. Penny took Stan's left hand and kissed it on his bare ring finger. "This is for your wife," she said. "I hope you meet her again." She sprang into the front passenger side.

Argillite also took Stan's hand, his right, and shook it, saying, "I called you fool's gold, but now I know you are authentic. From now on I'll think of you as Electrum. It's an alloy of gold and silver. Specimens found in nature are rare, but they are incredibly exquisite. I have one in my collection, and with you we found another." Argillite held out a small paper envelope to Stan. "It's not electrum, but native gold," he said. "Worth a few hundred dollars. I keep it hidden in my van for emergencies. You might find it useful."

Stan said farewell and waved as they drove away, and he put the envelope in his backpack. He crossed the road, lugging his pack over one shoulder. He set it down, put out his thumb to a passing vehicle, and with his other hand wiped his wet cheeks.

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The day grew old and sad as Stan waited for a ride, and by the onset of decayed dusk, someone stopped for him, a construction worker of about Stan's age, returning home. Stan climbed in the cab of the shiny pickup truck and jammed his pack at his feet. The fellow smoked cigarettes and the truck emitted a throaty purr when the driver shifted gears. He told Stan, "The job up here is done." He said he had been making good money working twelve-hour shifts, six days a week, and he said not much else, content to help a person in need.

They stopped at a gas station/quick mart, where Stan bought some fresh fruit, bread and peanut better, and two hot chili dogs. When they reached the man's town, he offered to put Stan up for the night at his house, a few miles out of Stan's way, but Stan declined and said he had to keep traveling. When the truck drove growling away, the hour neared midnight. Stan looked around for a place to sleep. Next to him there was a traffic island covered with chest-high shrubs. He waded into the middle and found space enough to lie down. It was soft and well

hidden. The night was quiet, but traffic picked up long before dawn. He woke and knew he could not sleep more. Thoughts turned to Penny. She seemed like such a warm, noble person. He wished he had spoken plainly to her and Coyote, asking about their relationship. He hoped that Coyote had earned, and deserved, her as a wife—that he would be committed to her.

When the night seemed darkest, he rolled up his gear, crawled out, walked around the town, and found an open laundromat, where he washed and dried his clothes. Since no one else was there, he sat in his extra shorts—himself wrapped in a clean, stray, raggedy sheet—and read a science fiction paperback found in a pile of romance novels. He took the book with him.

For the next few hours, Stan caught short rides. From the people who helped him, he learned about the atmosphere enveloping the country. For as little time as he had been away from tracking news, Stan was astonished at how drastically things had changed. People were afraid and mistrustful, not of him, but of the government and the unknown. There were strange rumors going around, the people said. He purposefully did not listen to the radio. He tried hard not to converse, but if the drivers or other passengers were talkative, he adopted a technique to avoid answering questions; *he* began asking the questions, trying to learn as much as possible about the state of the world through hearing about their lives. Sensing intelligence and a kind, listening ear, most people talked freely.

By the middle of the day, Stan had reached two-thirds of the way to the Tolstoy Community and he had been dropped on the near side of a small town. He walked through the town, comprised of one street and a few shops, most of which were dilapidated and rundown, or closed. He wanted to arrive at the Tolstoy Community before dark, to be given a more favorable reception. So far his rides had been good ones, and he felt he had not been in danger. One more ride could take him to within walking distance of the community from the main highway.

In a short while, a raft-like 1980s luxury sedan pulled up and stopped beside the road. In the back were two children and an elderly man who might have been their grandfather. His leathery skin stretched tightly over his face and he wore his long, salt-and-pepper hair in a ponytail. A woman drove the car, and a

teenaged son sat on the front passenger side. They said nothing, but the son got out of the car and indicated that Stan should put his pack in the trunk. Stan was nervous about being separated from his possessions, but a family with a grandfather and children? That seemed safe enough. He wanted to take his money from the pack, and the gold flakes, but not in front of them, and there was no chance to do it privately. Expectantly watching Stan, the boy held open the trunk as Stan quickly pulled out his sweater and relinquished the pack. The trunk door slammed, and after waiting for the boy to scoot to the middle, Stan slipped into the front seat. At least he had the window.

"Do you know where the Tolstoy Community is?" Stan said.

"The which?" the woman asked.

"The Tolstoy Community."

"What highway is it near?"

Stan told her and she said, "We're going right past there."

As the car rolled down the road, Stan began to relax. The children were near the ages of his own, and he turned halfway around and tried to make eye contact with them. The old man meditated on the passing scenery, or dozed. The older child shied away from Stan and pursed her lips, but the younger child, who reminded Stan of Chrysanthe, smiled and winked at him with both brown eyes simultaneously. Stan played little invented games like this with her until he grew sleepy. His back was getting uncomfortable twisting around, and the teenaged boy kept grimacing until Stan finally gave up the games and faced frontward. The little girl leaned forward and tugged Stan's hair. It did not hurt, but he put up his hand to stop her from pulling harder. She was not wearing a seatbelt. The hair pulling occurred several times and became another game, which Stan enjoyed, until the woman said "Quit that!" and reached to slap the girl. The girl, however, was quicker, and fell back against the seat out of range. Stan sighed gently and picked up a doll from under his feet. He felt sleepy from the previous abbreviated night, and he leaned his head against the window, using his sweater for a pillow. Drowsiness stole up on him.

Stan's next awareness was a blurred riot of brown, and thudding pain. He was sprawling in gravel on his side. His arm and head hurt horribly. Blinking stupidly, he looked at the

teenaged boy above him, sitting on the car seat and showing all his yellow teeth, and holding the inside handle of the door. Stan tried to sit up. The boy pulled the door and it bumped into and scraped Stan's head. The boy pushed the door out and jerked it back hard, and Stan ducked as the door swung with force over him and slammed shut. The car peeled out, tires spinning up dust and gravel. Stan covered his head and held his breath as the car jumped forward and flew down the road, roaring and spewing blue smoke.

Stan sat up and felt his dirty, bleeding arm. He carefully rubbed out the small rocks imbedded in his skin. In a minute he felt capable of standing, and still dazed, he looked up and down the empty road. The car was gone, except for its tire marks. He was without backpack, money, or map. They were all in the trunk with all his new, expensive equipment. The gold flakes Argillite had given him were gone. What was most valuable to him—the photograph of Mindy and the children—was gone.

He guessed that the woman had pulled to the side of the road while Stan had been asleep, and the teenaged boy pushed him out onto the ground. She must have crept around to open the door from the outside. Stan bent down, picked up his sweater, and shook out the dust. The sweater was all he had left, plus the clothes he was wearing and his wedding ring. In his shirt pocket was the book of Psalms. When he remembered that this was the sweater Mindy had started knitting at the Victoria hotel on their wedding trip, he broke into tears of devastation, but this did not last long. He had been training himself to push away sorrows, which seemed to pile up with every change of direction.

He did not know exactly where he was. Without his backpack, he had lost the appearance of legitimacy to people who might give him a ride. There was nothing to do but walk. In the weeds ahead, he spotted his paperback book and picked it up. The boy in the car must have tossed it from the window.

It took longer than usual for a car to stop, but one did, a sporty two-seater vehicle, and the driver said that the Tolstoy Community was not far away. The man wore slacks and a knit shirt, was in his fifties, and said, "I often buy their produce from a local farmer's market."

When Stan mentioned he had been robbed, and he showed the man his bloody, gouged arm, the man shook his head and said, "I'll take you to the Tolstoy Ranch. It's off the highway, but I'll take you there."

The man attacked the road well above the speed limit, but the car handled smoothly, so Stan was not uncomfortable. The car turned left off the highway and they entered countryside where the road accompanied a creek through a deep molded canyon, which branched off to many brown side-canyons lined with conifers. They came to a weed-obstructed sign in front of a farmhouse that backed up to the base of the hillside. A lush, carpeted canyon flowed beside and behind the house. The sign said only "Tolstoy" because the bottom half was missing. To the side of the house in the yard, children jumped on a trampoline, screaming with joy. Above the house on the hill, solar panels faced south, and there was a Quonset hut greenhouse nearby. The compassionate man in the sports car drove away.

Gathering his courage, Stan walked up the steps to the porch and tapped the brass knocker against the front door.

***Thurgood Marshall and Harry Blackmun, two of the seven signers of* Roe v. Wade, *Blackmun its author. Arlington National Cemetery.***

*Some friends and I are driving on a steep road along cliffs a few thousand feet high. The valley far below is foggy. We almost reach the rim of the cliffs. The car stalls in the road and begins rolling backwards towards a guardrail. The brakes have failed. The car picks up speed, crashes through the guardrail, and flies off the cliff. But the car does not fall straight down. It glides, and the top edges of the cliffs recede behind us. The fog below us thins and dissolves. We fall and never hit the bottom, but keep on gliding, and soon we begin rising. The view is frightening and beautiful.*

**–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons**

***The Hutterian Society of Brothers, Woodcrest. 1982.***

## Chapter 23
# Found and Lost

Stan had been walking along the road for a few hours of the morning, and no one stopped to give him a ride, though dozens of cars and trucks passed, moving in his direction. It was Saturday. He held before his face and read the paperback book he had picked up at the laundromat. His stomach told him it was lunchtime, but he wanted to resist eating until noon—probably an hour away—so as to ration the small amount of food he carried. The road he walked beside met the east-west highway, and Stan turned left and continued on the shoulder. Without stopping, he tucked the book under his arm, unzipped the mostly empty sports duffel bag they had given him at the Tolstoy Community, and removed a water bottle and took a drink. He shuddered at the recollection of where he had just left after one night. The community had been recently invaded by looting marauders, and some of the people's wounds had become infected. He pushed these images away. Their suffering made it impossible to find a place for him, and anyway they were not the Hutterians—those he sought—but they told him the Hutterite colony was near.

A meadowlark sang melodically from a fencepost. A dead smell emanated from underfoot and he glanced down into the grass at the tight, swelled carcass of a possum with its mouth open in a toothy, empty threat. Beside it lay a old *Playboy* pornographic magazine, its cover an unambiguous allusion. The magazine was damp from recent rain, but not badly torn up. Stan kept walking, and all he could think about for the next minutes was going back to look through the magazine. He shivered as if a cold wind had blown by. Hearing another vehicle approach, he looked over his shoulder and saw a large red object coming along the highway, but he did not bother to stick out his thumb. The red thing thundered past, swung into a gravel turnout, and stopped—an antique firetruck. Stan jogged

up to the driver's side window. A boyish man in his early twenties silently studied Stan, who stood in place below, catching his breath, the boy considering what to do. Satisfied that Stan was safe, he leaned out and said, his voice loud enough to be heard over the noise of the engine, "I'm going to Spokane. Need a ride?"

Relieved at finally being able to rest, Stan nodded and shouted "Yes," ran around the front, and climbed into the cab. The boy ground the machine into gear and it rumbled forward. Stan guessed that the firetruck was from the 1930s or '40s. The paint was bright and new, and chrome parts gleamed like mirrors. The cab was open to the sky.

"Thanks for stopping," Stan said. "I've been on foot all day." Stan admiringly looked over the features of the interior and plucked at the new upholstery.

"Yes, it is striking," the boy said, glancing over to Stan and understanding his movements. "We worked on it all summer."

"There must be a story behind this," Stan said cautiously, fearing that the boy might resent a probing question.

"I attend college in Spokane, and I went home yesterday, north of Wenatchee, to pick up the truck for a campus event tomorrow. It belongs to a fraternity where I'm a member. We bought it last year, and it wasn't in great shape. But we had a mechanic rebuild the engine and many of the working parts. We searched all over the country for missing pieces, and this summer I worked 60 hours a week on restoring the body. My dad took his vacation and helped. We're not finished."

"What are your plans for it? I mean, what exactly does a fraternity want with an old firetruck?"

"Yeah, unusual, isn't it?" the boy answered, beaming. "At first it was just a crazy project. A frat member ran across it for sale in an advertising circular. It had been parked in a barn for 35 years, and the farmer wanted to trade a kidney for it. We coughed it up, and that's how it started."

Wearing utter shock on his face, Stan looked over at the driver.

The boy laughed and said, "Not a real kidney. He wanted a lot of money. We were going to fix it up, you know, and drive it in local parades and take girls out. It's our house mascot—but I've been thinking, we might get some Dalmatians and form a

volunteer fire department for the campus. With the way things are—disorder, government budget cuts—it might save somebody's life and preserve a building or two. The truck is serviceable as a working fire engine."

The boy reached to the dashboard and shouted, "Plug your ears." Without waiting, he pulled a lever and the siren wailed.

Ahead along the road stood a knot of people. As the firetruck drew near, Stan could see that it was a family. The people appeared to be a mom and three children, one of which was a large-framed teenaged boy. Like Stan, they also were hitchhiking and were ragged and grimy from life on the road.

The boy shook his head. "More people are wandering—traveling—these days. Reminds me of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but it's worse, and there's no California to aim for. I don't know where people are going. Refugees, I guess."

He glanced toward Stan and asked, not without sympathy in his voice, "What's your destination? You don't smell homeless. Are you a fugitive?"

Stan had no intention of answering the last question. But he trusted this young man who knew at least one important work of American literature. Stan's teaching experience gave him some abilities to read into the characters of people of this generation, and what he saw in the young man gave him confidence, and so he told his story, omitting political dimensions, gruesome detail, and the infamy of his in-laws.

When Stan completed the story, the young man waited an appropriate few seconds before speaking. "I'm sorry to hear about the loss of your wife. You know, it's funny, I suppose—the changes we've gone through in the past few years . . . how society is in upheaval. But for me in the upper social class, I hardly notice it in my personal life. Taxes and fees are high, tuition astronomical, and we go without luxuries, but strange as it might sound, life is ordinary."

Stan thought about how Tolstoy's *War and Peace* would have shown him that dichotomy, with the aristocracy—and military officers—attending fancy-dress balls, while to the west men were slaughtering each other in battle, and about how the corrupt Russian society would soon collapse into the far worse

corruption of brutal atheistic Communism, but he did not feel like talking about literature or history.

"There's one difference from ordinary," the boy said mysteriously.

"What's that?"

The boy reached with his right hand over to his left hip and lightning quick, swung out a pistol, pointing it into the air.

Stan flinched away and half expected to be shot.

"I never travel without Whisk Broom. At my college, firearm self-defense is a required PE course."

"That's illegal."

"It is, but we do it anyway. It's necessary."

"You remind me of a former friend. Why do you call it a whisk broom?"

The boy laughed and pushed the gun back into its holster. "My mother hates guns. She always said that a broom behind the bedroom door was all she needed. She kept her broom, and Dad, a shotgun, which he jokingly called *his* broom. Mine is small, so I named it Whisk Broom."

"I see."

They rode along for several minutes.

"So, whence are you traveling?" the boy asked again.

"You like to read, correct?" Stan asked in answer.

"I like good stories."

"Well, a couple years ago I was searching for information on Leo Tolstoy—"

"Oh yeah, I've never read his novels. Not as yet."

"Well, Tolstoy wrote short stories, too, and I was looking for a collection of them when I ran across a unique publishing company. The people who publish these books lived in communes and admired Tolstoy's notions of living a simple life faithful to the teachings of Christ."

"Hippies?"

"No, not hippies. They live by a strict moral code. Most of their communes are in the eastern part of the United States, but they have a couple overseas, too. This group started in Germany in the 1930s, but I found out they were once associated with another group called the Hutterites that has been living communally since the Reformation in the 1500s."

"Really? Amazing!"

"They live on big farms in the western states and provinces, and there are hundreds of them. There's one west of Spokane that I'm looking for. This is what I was doing around Davenport. Someone told me that I might find a commune there, and I did, but it wasn't Hutterite. Not really a commune anymore, but separate households in a cooperative business. Organic farming. The people were nice and gave me a meal, a bed for the night, and a shower. The bad thing was they had been raided a few weeks ago. Their food stores had been stolen and people were injured. At least one person had gangrene in a wound. It was a mess. They would have taken me back to the highway, but with all the trouble, they couldn't pull away from work. They were rebuilding a barn that a gang torched."

"Bad."

Five minutes passed without further comment. Farmland rolled by. There were large patches of grain and hay, and unplanted parcels of plowed ground divided by tree-lined creeks. The day was growing warm, but the air was not dusty. The breeze whipped around the windshield and felt relaxing. The firetruck soon came to a settlement, and the boy stopped at a convenience store.

He swiped his credit card, gave Stan the gas key and said, "Fill it with regular. It won't take much. You have to buy gas whenever possible, even if the price is murder. I need to pee."

Stan put the nozzle into the truck's receptacle and turned on the pump. Nothing happened, and he heard a hollow tapping coming from the store. Someone motioned to him from inside the shaded, barred, plate-glass window. He walked to the far side of the truck, bent down, and fiddled with the bottom of his pant leg. With $55 cash in hand—almost the total amount of a loan from the Tolstoy Community that he promised to repay someday—he went to the window and passed the money inside.

"Do you know anything about Hutterites around here?" he yelled into the sour, cigarette-fragranced slot.

The woman behind the glass had flushed skin and painted lips. She pointed east, the direction Stan had been traveling. "I've seen their tractors running up the side road that way."

Stan felt excited because he was getting close. The boy came out, jumped on the running board and began washing the windshield.

"They didn't accept your card," Stan said.

The pump just then shut off at $55.01. The boy looked at it and said, "How—you didn't have to pay for the gas."

"Money, I don't need. It's friendship that's hard to come by."

The young man gave Stan a $100 bill that he had folded in the ashtray and said, "Keep the change." Moved so that he could not speak, Stan nodded thanks. The young man understood.

Stan reached into the cab and lifted down his bag. Finding his voice, he said, "I guess this is where I leave you. The woman inside said the Hutterite farm is nearby. I appreciate the ride."

"Wait," the boy said. "I'll take you to your Hutterites. I'd like to see them myself."

"Are you sure?"

"It'll be an experience."

They soon made a right-hand turn. From the country road that followed along a creek, the farmland appeared greener and flatter than near the Tolstoy Community. They passed a few miles and saw nothing like a communal farm.

"There's a house," Stan said. "Stop up there. I want to ask for directions."

A man in front of the ranch-style house was watering a flowerbed with a hose. He looked surprised and amused to see the red firetruck turn into his driveway. The boy shut off the engine, and the man twisted the nozzle closed, dropped the hose on the ground, and took off his cap. His face now wore a guarded expression, but he was not frightened. Stan greeted him and asked, "I'm looking for a Hutterite farm that's supposed to be around here."

The man relaxed a little and smiled. "Oh, the Hutterites? Is there a fire?"

Stan wasn't sure if he was serious or joking. "No fire; it belongs to college students in Spokane."

"Oh, well then, go back up the road you came on and take the next right and go about a mile. The colony is on the right, but it's not visible from the road, except for their grain storage

towers. My wife just came from there; she bought eggs. What's your business there, if I may ask?"

Stan thought that scrambled eggs would be perfect about now. "Actually, I want to join the colony."

"Ah, is that so?" he said, dubiously. "They're good people. Except that they're shrewd in their trading, we've had no problem with them. In fact, they've helped us out many a time when things have been hard. And, in turn, we help them . . . when there have been raiders and such people roaming the area."

"I just came from a place called the Tolstoy Community, and they had a band of hooligans ravage their area."

"Really, is that so? I think you mean the Tolstoy Ranch."

"Well, they never told me their official name."

"It's called the Tolstoy Ranch, but no matter. Anyway, I'm sorry to hear about their trouble. Was anyone hurt?"

"Yes, but not fatally."

"That's a relief, at least . . ."

"I was wondering, have the Hutterites ever had these problems? They're pacifists like the Tolstoy Ranchers, and won't defend themselves, I believe."

The man snorted and said, "No, I don't think the Hutterites are defenseless. We and the other residents and farmers around here have organized a Neighborhood Watch for our own families and neighbors, which includes the Hutterites. We've created a curfew and set up checkpoints on the roads at night, strictly enforced. Anyone who travels on these roads after 10:00 p.m. is stopped and questioned. We're pretty serious. Serious, like a 30-06 rifle. We also have a few well-outfitted patrols that drive around from time to time. This is all unsanctioned, you know. The sheriff's department knows about it, but they don't say anything. They realize they can't keep up with the violence and robbery, and they let us take care of it ourselves."

At that instant Stan heard a rapidly growing roar in the west that was becoming incredibly loud. Clutched by fear, he rolled into the ditch as two fighter jets screamed over the treetops. The man and the boy had covered their ears, but neither had moved. Stan climbed from the ditch, brushed the leaves from his clothing, and returned sheepishly.

The man shook his head and said, "Son, the ditch won't protect you against them. If you're going to live here, you'll have to get used to the jets. There's an Air Force base between here and Spokane. They fly over all the time. What was I saying? Oh, the background of the Hutterites . . . They're peaceful people and couldn't be safe without us and God looking after them too, I'm sure, but they do keep one or two varmint rifles around the colony. The baptized men follow Jesus in turning the other cheek, and, I shouldn't say this, but the older boys . . . well, it's hard for the colony to keep them from hunting expeditions, meaning their boys patrol with our men. So far nobody around here's been hurt by the roving looters. It's a safe place to be. And since we're going to be neighbors, I'd better introduce myself. I'm Nelson Chadwick."

Without thinking, Stan gave his own real name and shook Mr. Chadwick's hand.

The college boy rapped a brass bell on the firetruck with his knuckle.

Stan thanked the man for the information and said, "I hope to see you again."

The man tipped his cap and said nothing; he bent down to pick up the garden hose and resumed watering.

The boy and Stan soon found the tall, silver, dome-topped cylinders that dominated the sky over the colony. Two rows of long white buildings came into view. Multicolored flowerbeds filled small nooks of the layout between sidewalks and lawns. The yards were trim and orderly, like a well-kept park. But not everything was orderly. Stan's heart fluttered when he saw an unattended tipped-over bicycle to the side of the driveway. There were children here, too. Many more than at the Tolstoy Ranch. A sob rose in his chest as he thought again about his own children, somewhere. Whether they were alive or dead, he did not know.

Here, at least, was a sanctuary from the heartless world, a place reached almost by traveling back 500 years. As strange as this was, Stan felt at home. But he was scared, not knowing what their response might be. They might send him away like the Tolstoy Ranch people did.

In the yard of the nearest building, Stan noticed a small girl kneeling on one knee and watching the firetruck. He adjusted his glasses. She wore a midnight blue dress covered in dogwood flowers, with a sky-blue apron and a dark bandana. "Just like the photographs," Stan whispered. He felt as if he had stepped into a movie or had stumbled into a hypnotic dream, one that had haunted him many nights but until this moment had eluded clarity. Unlike a real dream, where the images plunge forward without control or meaning, here he could look around and act within it, and smell the air. He climbed from the firetruck and gazed around. Every detail of the colony held delightful and mysterious meanings. A broom hung on the wall outside of every door, but the styles of the brooms varied, and some hung handle-down and others handle-up. Remaining in the cab, the boy said, "It's a different country."

Stan came near the girl and asked, "Can you tell me where the leader of the colony is?"

"Do you want the Boss? He lives at the last door on the row," the girl answered simply in a faint Germanic accent. She was neither shy nor bold.

Stan knocked on the door, and a short, broad-shouldered man in black pants, suspenders, and a checkered shirt opened the door. He wore a trim, dark beard and had shaved his mustache. He listened to Stan's introduction and his request to join the colony. The man fingered his beard and then said without further comment, "Peter handles that. Next door."

Each building, as Stan figured, was a duplex, and "Peter" lived in the other apartment of this building. Someone opened the door before Stan reached it. His gray head made him look to be about 70 years old. He was dressed almost the same as "the Boss," but with a blue shirt, and he kept a full beard, including a mustache—the latter of which varied with the Hutterite custom, as Stan learned later. Peter gravely listened to Stan's repeated introduction.

"You'll have to come back later," he said to Stan, and then moved past him—leaving him standing in the doorway—and walked toward the firetruck. "Tour buses arrive from Spokane once a month. You sign up and have lunch for $15. You'll have

to come with a tour. I'll give you a phone number to call." Stan watched, dumbfounded.

Another Hutterite man, much younger, followed the older man out the door saying, "He doesn't want a tour, Peter. He said he wants to join the colony."

The two Hutterite men circled the firetruck, and when they came to the cab they asked the boy if he might start it up, which he did obligingly. They listened to the engine and then the younger Hutterite signaled the boy to cut it off and asked, "Do you want to sell this?"

"Don't think so. I'm taking it to Spokane."

The two Hutterites walked together back toward Peter's apartment while Stan returned to the truck and watched them talking.

The boy said, "Are you staying, or shall I wait?"

Stan shook his head and raised his palm to tell him to be quiet.

Stan had no idea what would happen, but he was not leaving yet. There was earnest conversation about him, no doubt, but he could not hear the words. The older man climbed up the steps, entered, and closed the door. The younger came back and put out his hand.

"My name is Jacob. I'm supposed to interview you and get acquainted. We'll spend the rest of the day together looking at the colony and discussing what life is like here for us, and then you can have a bed tonight in my room. I'll have a talk with Peter on Sunday—he's the preacher and colony leader—and then we'll see what's to happen next. First, I'm to ask if you're hungry. Would you like something to eat?"

"Yes, if you don't mind." Stan called up to the boy, "Do you want to eat?"

The boy opened the door, climbed out onto the running board, and said, "No thanks. Maybe I'll come back sometime to visit."

Stan introduced the boy—giving no name—to Jacob who shook his hand solemnly, then took out a paper on which he scribbled a phone number. He gave the paper to the boy and said, "Maybe you would like to join the colony, too?"

The boy laughed and said, "Maybe later. But I like it here. It's intriguing."

Jacob said, "It's often boring and work is hard, but we're happy. It's the end times. Life in the world is desperate and violent. When you get tired of it, think about returning."

The boy climbed back into the firetruck cab, handed Stan's duffel bag to him, shifted the truck into gear, and made a three-point turn at the end of the driveway. He wailed the siren once and drove away.

Jacob turned to Stan. "Dinnertime is over now, but I'm sure we can find some food to eat. Here, I'll take your bag into Peter's apartment."

Jacob deposited Stan's bag inside the door, and Stan followed him to another long building set amidst and in-between the double row of residences. Inside, a slender woman dressed much like the girl he saw earlier, bustled about the kitchen end of the room. On the other two-thirds of the room were lines of tables and benches. Jacob spoke to the woman in a low voice. He and Stan took seats and watched while the woman set before them two hot, deep-fried pastries each, rolls and jam, and sliced sausages on a plate.

They ate, and talked about the firetruck, the boy, and Stan's recent experiences. Very hungry, Stan all the while tried to wait until he had swallowed before speaking, but he was not succeeding at this. The food was rich and delicious.

At last Jacob asked, "So, you want to join the colony? Why?"

Stan remained silent, and then he sighed unconsciously. He felt deathly tired and sat motionless with his eyes closed, and he began to speak, trusting Jacob with the truth as he did the firetruck driver. "I need to rest," he said slowly. "My wife is gone, my parents are dead. The government is hunting me. I was fired from my teaching job. My children are alive, maybe, somewhere. I've been hiding in the wilderness, and I'm so lonely."

He pushed away the plate and put his head down on his arms on the table while a wave of grief and weariness engulfed him. He sniffed and swallowed and then in a few moments came back upright in his seat. "I'm okay now," he said.

After a decent silence, Jacob finished the last piece of sausage and then said, "I'd like to hear more about your story, but I need to ask a question. Do you read the Bible every day?"

Stan undid the button on his shirt pocket and pulled out the section of Psalms. "Morning and night, if I don't go to sleep. What about you?"

"I have a Bible that contains German and English in parallel columns. If I can't understand the German, I read it in English, and vice versa. I read a couple verses in the morning and think about them all day while I work. Do you know German?"

"No, I'm afraid only a little."

"Then, no matter; let's take a tour."

Jacob thanked the cook generously, and they went downstairs to a basement where Jacob showed Stan the canned fruit, jars of vinegar, bottles of wine, and a room full of hanging bags of goose down, all processed at the colony. Stan asked if the Hutterites made beer, and Jacob said, "No, but they should."

They left the storerooms from garage doors opening onto a ramp dug into the earth. Just outside the perimeter of the residence buildings was a three-acre vegetable garden. Children were hoeing the larger weeds and cutting tall, green cornstalks, and one girl emerged from the stalks lugging a basket of sweet corn ears. "The last of the season," Jacob said.

A girl in her late teens or early twenties was riding a lawnmower around the edge of the garden area. She was wearing a scarf head-covering and a full dress with an apron, much like the girl with the bicycle, but the fabric of the lawnmower girl's dress was made of a plaid fabric, green and blue, rather than flowered. She glanced up at the two watching men, and without gesture or expression returned her gaze to the ground ahead of her. She was beautiful.

Jacob walked away to a nearby plot of ground encircled by a wooden fence. Stan followed. The graves in it were unmarked except for covering mounds of bare earth.

"The one at the far end is Peter's wife's. It's the newest."

From here Jacob led Stan to the seed potato warehouses, the duck house, the grain storage and silage towers, the air-conditioned hog barn, which was as sterile as a hospital, and at last the dairy, with its carousel milking parlor where cows, their udders bulging, got on the merry-go-round, and by the time they had completed a circuit, they had been milked. "The cows have learned to line up and enter the stalls by themselves," Jacob said.

"But sometimes a cow needs coaxing, so we have a boy stand nearby and swish her."

"What if someone in the colony is lazy?" Stan asked.

Jacob pondered this and then said, "Someone speaks to him."

"Is it that simple?"

"Usually."

"What about more serious problems?"

"A person is shunned. No one is allowed to talk with him for a week."

"Does that happen often?"

"It's rare."

At last Jacob and Stan came full circle back to the front of Peter's apartment.

"I have chores for awhile," Jacob said. "You stay here and look at books for an hour and come find me in the garage over there." He was pointing to a building near the gardens.

Stan was nervous going back to meet Peter. The Hutterites seemed brusque. They were neither welcoming nor off-putting, but simply indifferent about Stan's presence. Peter answered the door and listened to Stan say, "Jacob suggested that I read some books."

"This is the center for books on the Hutterites, and they're all for sale." Peter invited Stan inside and brought out several boxes. Stan took the books out and leafed through a few. This was a collection, as Stan guessed, more complete on the Hutterites than any of the largest university libraries. One book was by Peter himself, and to this Stan gave the remainder of his time. He was impressed by the book's scholarliness. Peter sat implacably in a rocker nearby and read newspapers. The hour passed, and with the $100 bill, Stan paid Peter for the book and tucked it into his duffel bag still sitting by the door. Peter brought him his considerable change. Stan went outside and looked around for children he might speak with, but there weren't any around, so he proceeded to the garage. He found Jacob putting a tire onto an old pickup truck. The truck had small dents all over it and gray spots painted over the dents.

"Hailstones . . . she had a flat," he said. "Now let's finish the tour. I want to show you fields and equipment."

Jacob backed the truck out the garage door and left the central part of the colony.

"We have 74 people living here, including seven babies. We farm about 6,000 acres. See those two tractors? The big tractor working the ground is new, and it's the largest one that the company makes, about 600 horsepower. The smaller tractor parked under the trees is for pulling out the big one when it gets stuck in the mud." Jacob went on to show Stan the irrigation systems, the well, and the alfalfa fields.

Stan had a dozen questions, and he was reluctant to pose them, but his situation demanded that he have an answer right away to at least one. He asked, "What do you believe about obeying the law, the civil law, when it's wrong or foolish to do so?"

Jacob looked at Stan across the cab of the pickup, as if to try to discern the reason for the question, and said, "You'd better read Peter's books on Hutterite history. We once were chased all over Eastern Europe. All but a handful were killed, but look at us now. We have colonies throughout the prairie in Canada and the U.S. We're probably the fastest growing ethnic group in the world." A little while later they came up on an intersection with the highway. A short, steep hill lay to the left. Before he reached the intersection, Jacob stopped and took a long gaze out his side window to the highway behind the hill; he took a quick look right, hit the gas, and shot right through the stop sign.

Jacob grinned over to Stan. "We got a ticket once, but we went to court and told them, 'Either put up a yield sign or move the hill.' They didn't do either one, but they didn't fine us, so I guess they saw our point."

By the time Stan had seen all that could be seen of the Hutterite colony in two hours, he dearly hoped they would let him stay. When they arrived back at the garage and parked the pickup, Jacob said, "It's almost time for church. We have a sermon and a prayer time each day, six days a week before dinner, and you are welcome to eat with us."

"May I attend the service?"

"It's against our religion to forbid anyone from going."

They prepared at Peter's apartment. Stan washed up in the bathroom and inquisitively surveyed to see if it was different from the typical American bathroom. It wasn't, except for the

lack of ornamentation. On the shelf sat a bottle of the same shampoo that Stan had used before his life turned upside down. He looked into the mirror. His beard was long and thickening, but he noticed thinning hair at the corners of his forehead. When he left the bathroom, Peter inspected Stan's clothing and gave him a black jacket to wear, saying, "Now you'll look like a Hutterite . . . the top half." (Stan's pants were brown instead of black.) Peter also found a black hat in a wooden chest and asked Stan to wear that too, but Jacob intervened, "He doesn't need a hat." Without a word, Peter put it away.

On the walk to the schoolroom—where they were to hold the worship service—no one spoke. Stan could see lines of people, young and old, women and girls colored in blue, and men and boys in black, all drawing near. He sat on the left with Jacob on the back row. The room was square with a polished hardwood floor and paneled walls with no adornment on them except a large, round clock, which hung behind the teacher's desk. Some older men of the colony sat in chairs in the front and faced the rest of the congregation. Stan wanted to stare at the women on the right, but resisted the temptation. The assistant minister, a short-bearded, stocky man Stan had not met, began the service by leading a song.

The hymn was primitive and plaintive. The Hutterites, who in all other aspects of their lives seemed to bottle up their emotions, had suddenly become unstoppered. The voices together were mournful and wailing, making a sound he had never heard before. Stan was stunned, caught up in another time, another age, another place of the world—or maybe not even this world, but from a lofty seat looking down at the sickness and ills of the human race over the centuries. The music progressed slowly and loudly, but it was only human voices, and the women were louder than the men. The assistant minister lined out the words in German and everyone followed. Stan did his best to hum along, following the change of notes an indistinguishable fraction of a second after everyone else, but he soon was overcome in thinking of his own grief, and he sat silent, with eyes closed and his throat blocked. He did not wipe the tears from his face because he did not want anyone to notice the movement. The singing went on and was not so much a tune as

a stately, somber, yet passionate procession of notes, rising and falling, faintly melodic. Jacob told him later that the hymn was about how this world is not our home and we need to prepare for our real, heavenly home.

Of all Stan's experiences on the colony, the singing on that first day was the most intensely spiritual; for the remainder of his life, the memory of it, and the other singing he heard there, gave him the strength to endure hardships. Years later he would recall the hard work and delicious rest, the powerful silence of the open land, and how he developed strong abilities of mental concentration by living with few outside distractions. But whenever he contemplated going back to visit the Hutterites, it was not so much for the overall environment, nor for people who became friends. The singing drew him.

Immediately after the hymn, the sermon followed, read in German by the assistant minister. Stan could pick out a few words he understood. At last he felt confident enough to steal a glimpse of the women's side. One of the unmarried young women sat on the end of a row across from him and nearer the front, and Stan felt drawn to her, she wearing a modest but colorful dress and apron. Stan thought she might be unmarried because the scarf covering her hair was the same dark color as that of the younger girls and different from the older women's dotted scarves. She did not look his way, but Stan knew that, he being an outsider, everyone in the room, including her, was aware of him despite trying to ignore him. He realized that she was the girl on the riding lawnmower. She had a smooth, contoured face with a slightly pointed chin, and a patch of her cheek was dusted with small, dark freckles. Her eyebrow was dark brown—but the braid at her forehead showing from under the scarf shone with blonde lights. Stan closed his eyes and listened to the rhythm and tones of the sermon.

A sudden thumping and rustling from the room broke Stan's abstraction. Everyone was getting on their knees to pray and Stan followed suit. Before he had been forced to wander, he had been accustomed to kneeling on a yielding padded bench in church and leaning on the pew in front. But as he looked from the corner of his eye, it appeared that the Hutterites knelt straight up on the hard floor. With nothing to prop on, he swayed, and

then he noticed that the men near him rested their bottoms against the seat behind, and so he scooted back an inch. The anchor stopped him from swaying, but this was no help for his knees. He thought that if he stayed at the colony he would sew pads into the knees of his pants.

At "Amen," everyone resumed their seats, the preacher said a few more words, and then they filed out, men first, then women, and lastly the older men from up front, including Peter.

Jacob was behind Stan on the sidewalk. Earlier, Jacob had instructed him that there was to be no talking after the service so as to allow people to meditate on the sermon. But when a bird sang nearby, Jacob leaned forward and spoke in a low voice, "The robin sings outside my window every morning. Soon he will be gone and then we'll have the winter smells."

At the evening meal, which was in the building where Stan and Jacob had eaten the snack, the men were served first and then the women. Stan had hoped to be seated on an outside bench so he could watch across the room for the lawnmower girl, but they placed him on the inside, as he thought, on purpose. The Boss gave thanks. Stan enjoyed the meal more than anything he had eaten in months. He ate roast goose, steamed fresh asparagus, boiled potatoes, rolls with jam and honey, and milk for beverage. For dessert they had rhubarb with raspberries for sweetener and coffee. No one spoke except for an occasional "Thanks." The dishes were passed once around and no one asked for seconds. The young children were not present, and Stan guessed they had been fed earlier. The dinner went quickly and Stan was the last one to finish. The men waited for him, which made him uncomfortable. The Boss gave thanks again, and the men moved to leave. The women remained, and as Stan and the others exited, men who had come in late from work were pulling off boots and washing up at a sink near the door.

The sky was growing dark. Jacob and Stan walked to his and Peter's apartment. Peter apparently had been brought his meal there to eat alone, because a woman was leaving with a tray of empty dishes. Peter invited Stan and Jacob to sit down and drink apple cider, and then he began a series of questions about Stan's background and his theological beliefs. Some young children played quietly in the neighboring room, a sitting room. Peter

listened carefully to his answers, and then on each subject gave a brief description of the Hutterite belief. Stan felt less like this was an interrogation as much as a relaxed get-acquainted session. Jacob, however, said nothing, but listened intently.

One topic was the relationship between the Law of Moses and the Gospel. Stan said, "We can't fulfill the Law, but Christ fulfilled it for us, and we are saved through faith in him." And to his surprise, Peter agreed. Stan had incorrectly assumed that the Hutterites, who lived austere lives, would believe that a person had to earn his way into heaven.

At last the interview was over, and Peter pushed back his chair. Stan smelled something not belonging here—a scent of India incense. It had a pleasant, pungent aroma, but he asked, "Where's that smell coming from?"

Peter got up and found that the children were burning incense sticks.

"How could they have gotten them?" Stan wondered out loud.

"I'm asking the same question," Peter said from the doorway to the next room. "Children, put those out."

They did so promptly and Peter returned to the kitchen. "I trap coyotes in the fields and make scent baits, which I sell all over the world. I like to hear coyotes sing at night. They'll sing over here for awhile, then here, and then here," he said pointing in all different directions. "It's music!"

Stan felt sleepy and yawned, making a slight attempt to conceal it.

Jacob stood up and said, "He should go to bed now. I'm going to visit at the Pauls' apartment for awhile. Good night, Stan. Tomorrow is Sunday, and nobody works, except the assistant dairyman. But you won't get much Sabbath rest, because Hutterites are world-class talkers."

Jacob disappeared outside into the darkness. By this time Peter had pulled back the covers of a second bed in Jacob's room and laid out clean, midnight-blue pajamas, nearly the same color as what Stan wore on his wedding night, but these were flannel rather than silk. Stan showered and emerged in the pajamas.

"If you want to stay," Peter said, "I'll suit you in Hutterite clothing on Monday, and I'm sure the Boss will have work for

you. What are you fit for? Do you have farm or mechanical experience?"

Holding Peter's book that he had purchased, Stan sat on the bedside. He felt like a young child once more. Safe and secure. He yawned again. "I did my own mechanical work on my bicycle, and . . . I helped my uncle restore old cars, and I did garden work for my parents. That's all."

"I see. Maybe then in the spring you can work with me in the vegetable garden. Or help me with the honeybees. Or you can help me with the book I'm writing. You're an English teacher? There's work for everyone here in the colony."

Peter left the room and pulled the door nearly shut. Stan opened the book. He read the first page, and in less than a minute he was asleep holding the book open on his chest. Some time later Jacob quietly came into the room. He prepared for sleep and knelt down beside his bed to pray. Then he leaned over and gently took hold of the book Stan held and tried to draw it away. Stan clutched at the book and mumbled, "I'm not asleep. Don't bother me." Jacob did not let go, and when Stan relaxed his grip, Jacob pulled the book away and set it down on the floor beside the bed. He turned off the small electric lamp hanging over the bed on the otherwise bare wall, and in five minutes he, too, was soundly asleep.

+ + +

Within a week, to an outsider, Stan would have been indistinguishable from a Hutterite.

His needs had been so great, and the colony met so many of them, that he did not begrudge loss of self-liberty; indeed, he seldom thought about the loss. If happiness could be weighed objectively, and if pleasure is in part the cessation of pain, Stan was happier and enjoyed himself more than at any other period in his life thus far. Every day but Sunday he rose early and worked hard; he kept a platonic eye on the lawnmower girl, who, he learned by asking a child, was named Lydia, though he did not speak with her; he ate well, he read when there was spare time, and every night he fell asleep exhausted. Only in the moments before sleep did a cloud of sadness overwhelm him as he thought about his son and daughter, and Mindy, who was lost.

Mercifully, sleep, "the balm of hurt minds," relieved him at the end of each day.

Occasionally, he talked with Jacob, who he found both similar to and different from the other Hutterite men. Jacob seldom talked about himself—he did say he was on an extended visit from his home colony in Montana. Stan would have described Jacob as owning a strong physical bearing, or a quiet commanding presence, or grimness, or precision of thinking and intellect far beyond that of the other Hutterite men. He reminded Stan of his uncle. Jacob fit in with the other Hutterites, but his submission and conformity was both greater and less than the other men, as if he better understood the customs and rules, and knew when they should be bent and when they should be enforced with extremity. As yet, Stan had no explanation for this difference, but it did make it so that he and Jacob developed a close friendship, because Stan was different too, and Jacob was older than the few other Hutterite men who, though also of age, had not taken wives.

The Boss had watched Stan with two purposes. One was to keep him away from the young unmarried Hutterite women, and the other was to evaluate Stan's work so as to put him in a productive enterprise most matching his aptitudes. He soon saw that reaching both of these goals would be thorny, because work in which Stan had competence fell within the realm of the women. The Boss placed him into different employments, and in a few, like carpentry, Stan was useless.

But when one day Peter asked Stan to work in the vegetable garden to complete winter preparations, Stan found his niche. Without anyone telling him what to do, he went out by himself the next morning in the rosy, cool dawn before breakfast and began working. Apparently, he had taken walks around the garden in the evenings and already knew what was needed. Colder temperature soon eliminated garden work, and the Boss put Stan into a rotation of mechanical and farm jobs within his abilities, and this continued through early winter. Jacob returned to his home colony, and Stan did not have him to talk with. During these months, except for occasional ventures to Nelson Chadwick's home, Stan kept quiet and to himself. He read, and

he wrote a journal and enjoyed the relative peace on this island apart from the world.

Chadwick frequently offered Stan news from the outside, and though Stan preferred to hear nothing, he did not raise objections. The Hutterites themselves kept informed, if not current to the day. Armed anti-government attacks had broken out with increased frequency. A band would emerge to kill an elected official on the street of a small town, and then scatter to the winds. The government responded as governments invariably do—with increased security and repression of freedoms—which provoked greater rebellion. At least one night a week, usually on a weekend, a handful of younger Hutterite men, Stan among them, gathered at Mr. Chadwick's house to watch television news and discuss the dramatic events. Chadwick would bring out beef or pork barbecue and coleslaw for the men to eat, since he once owned a chain of three barbecue restaurants.

It was on such an occasion on a particular Friday evening after the New Year that Stan and two other young men witnessed an incredible occurrence.

They were all in Chadwick's front room watching the start of a regular live news show when the screen went black. The next instant, a picture came on of a studio, but not the same they had been seeing. Tense black, blurred figures holding black rifles against their shoulders stood alert against a noise-background of muffled thuds. This looked like a movie, except for the minimal action. Stan looked at Chadwick and asked if he had switched channels, and the latter vigorously shook his head. An attractive woman with short-cropped blonde hair and wearing a headset microphone stepped in front of the camera. She wore a black sleeveless shirt. Sweat covered her forehead. A black carbine was slung over her shoulder. The woman vaguely reminded Stan of Mindy, but she was thinner—gaunt—and far too pale. Chadwick lurched from his chair and fumbled to put a recording disk into the television unit.

"This is big," he said.

The woman began to speak. She was calm but intense and focused. Interspersed with her words and image was video of bloody aborted babies and other ongoing atrocities. "Friends,

our nation is desperately wicked. People sell their freedom that they may live for their pleasures. Fathers abandon their children, and other men rape and abuse them. Mothers kill their own babies before they are born and after they are born. You pervert your bodies. You men and women and children kill your consciences with drugs and entertainment. Bloodshed follows bloodshed, and the earth and sea and sky is fouled with the excrement of your sins. Preachers preach lies. They call evil good and good evil, and refuse to teach their followers to love their neighbors because the cost is too high. They yoke themselves with unbelievers and comfort them, and drive truth-tellers from their midst. The preachers love their salaries, projects, and reputations more than they love God, who has given us leanness of soul. Your children are being damned. Repent now because judgment is upon us. The government in control of the United States is the pus-filled head of the boil, which is our culture. The government's corruption is exponentially larger than the corruption of the people. This government will destroy thousands of its own citizens, and has already arrested and destroyed many, including members of my own family. The government murdered my father, mother, brothers and sisters, my husband and children. They said it was a natural event, but that was a lie. There are death camps in your midst. Have your loved ones disappeared? Are you missing family members? They may have been rounded up as enemies of the state or domestic terrorists.

"This is a secret the government wants to hide from you. The noise you hear behind me is gunfire. We—friends of mine—have connected into satellite relays for the major news networks and we may be cut off any moment. My friends out there who are watching me now or listening, resist the evil in your hearts! Also resist the evil from this government, which is no government at all, but a gyp. A cheat! Separate yourselves from evil. Have the strength to believe the truth. Use force if you must. Go into the streets and protest. You cannot live life normally again. We are at the beginning of civil—"

The noise behind the broadcast grew fierce and loud, drowning the voice of the woman. Gunfire exploded in the studio. The woman before the camera—the girl—stopped speaking as she

turned her head back and forth, beholding battle around her. She wore a familiar expression of calm defiance, dignity, and incredible sadness, and a sudden thought shot through Stan's being like a bullet, and again she looked directly into the camera and cried out, "Repent and resist! Repent and resist!" Then she jerked, and spasms of shock seized her face.

Two things happened at the same instant. A dark-clad body slammed into the girl and she plunged out of the camera's view, and the camera was knocked to the ground. But after the heavy equipment heeled over, the girl was again framed upright in the picture and the studio behind was sideways. The noise grew even louder, and the television's bass speaker buzzed percussively. The girl was dazed, and her eyes gazed behind and above the camera. She was not angry or afraid, only sad. From the side of the screen, an out-of-focus pistol came into view, aimed at her head inches away. The hand holding it was black-gloved. The television roared and buzzed, and blood splattered the lens, obliterating the image. A second later the screen went black.

Presently, music of a classical American symphony came on, and the network logo, and in a few minutes the news broadcast resumed in progress, as if nothing unusual had taken place.

The men in Chadwick's room had watched, stupefied.

There was a series of sex enhancement commercials before the conclusion of the half-hour program, and right at the end the anchor read a brief "breaking story" about domestic terrorists who had taken over the airwaves of one of the networks, but had been subdued and arrested. "More information will be forthcoming, no doubt," he said. "Stay tuned."

Chadwick finally hit the mute button.

Stan's sense was deadened. He had watched the awful scene with some detachment. It was shocking that such a thing happened, but for him it had little meaning at first. Up to the end of the girl's speech he had been a sympathetic observer, albeit remote, because this was but one of a series of terrible events that had transpired around the country, and not related to his personal tragedy. Her themes were familiar because of his knowledge of the Assembly. Dr. Sterne had said similar things before, he thought. But there was more—infinitely more—to

what he had just seen than a daring, ingenious, revolutionary group. As his thoughts worked, his perspective began to move. The girl's remembered facial expression of pity and defiance changed everything as he sat and stared at the dumb flickering television. An aching inconsolable groan began deep in his soul and swelled. He had seen that exact expression before, on the face in a photograph from a museum in Washington D.C. But he had to be sure. He asked Chadwick to replay the broadcast.

"Are you serious? It was appalling enough the first pass."

"No! I need to see it. Not all—only the first part."

Chadwick began playing the recording and stopped before the execution of the girl.

Stan's inkling had been correct, and now the whole horrible performance meant something entirely different than his first interpretation. And now his life was irrevocably changed. The uncertainty was over. Because the girl had been his wife, Mindy. He found her at last. He found her, and seconds later she died a brutal death before his eyes, and he lost her. And it was not a play or a television drama or a movie. It had been real. She died without any hope, believing that he and their children were dead.

The groan spontaneously bursting from his chest overwhelmed Stan completely.

***Colt M1991A1, .45 ACP.***

*I am a consultant for a college art lecture class. The teacher has to take a class photograph. I suggest that we organize the class according to hair color. It is a large class of 120 people. We ask all the blondes to stand in one group in a clump and the brunettes to stand in another. People with black hair go to the back. Next, we separate out people who have any gray. But there is another division—I want to place the attractive people in the front of the whole group. The idea is to give students a feeling of what it was like for Jews when they arrived at Nazi death camps and were separated, some to work, the rest culled for destruction. Everyone in the class goes along without objections.*

*The scene changes. I walk from the classroom and find myself below a wooden fence. On the fence is a painting of Christ crucified, with the thieves behind him and to his sides. The crosses are not perpendicular to the ground but lean sharply away from the fence. They are like the hand of God in the Sistine Chapel, the Father reaching out to Adam. An art student is working on the painting, which is protest vandalism. He will get into trouble if he is caught.*

**–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons**

***The Sistine Chapel in Rome, topside.***

## Chapter 24
# With the Colony

The Hutterites grieved with Stan and offered to recover Mindy's body, if possible, and bury it at the colony, but he quietly explained how dangerous this would be. With Jacob's assistance from Montana, and without telling Stan, Peter arranged for an affiliated community in Pennsylvania—as a disinterested party well-known for peace advocacy—to make the government contacts. The government gave up the body as a disingenuous and purely political humanitarian gesture. And so, after a faked burial in the east, her remains were brought to the Spokane colony by a circuitous route, the government being no better informed about Sterne relatives who might be at large. At the afternoon church service on the day of the burial, Peter preached a traditional funeral sermon in German and then translated it into English, and the singing was more otherworldly and mournful than usual.

Stan had long supposed that Mindy was dead, and when he learned that she really had been alive, she was indeed dead, murdered before the world's watching eyes. Stories circulated mouth to ear that the broadcast had been on virtually all channels, not only the one they had been watching, and now it was available everywhere on the Internet, popping up on sites faster than the government could shut them down.

After the initial trauma and horror of observing and grasping the reality, Stan returned to his previous sorrowful state, with some differences.

Once difference was that with the support he received from the colony, he felt more comforted than before. Men who had kept distant, now went out of their way to be friendly. Nothing would have given him more acceptance in the colony than Mindy's public killing; nothing would have bonded him to the colony like the Hutterites' participation in his grief. Another difference was his new perspective of Dr. Sterne's mysterious caution about

involving Mindy in the Assembly. Stan previously had always thought Sterne had been extreme in his evaluation of her. Could Sterne have foreseen the kind of pressure and suffering his daughter might endure someday which would drive her to take such revolutionary action? What the kidnappers likely did to Mindy was the worst nightmare imaginable. He guessed that she had been assaulted and had been made a sexual slave for the outlaws. Stan wondered if she had kept faithful to him in her heart. Of course she had.

Another question: surely she had escaped from the outlaws, but how? Was she faithful after the escape? Her words in the broadcast had shone with complete sincerity. He asked Chadwick what he thought, and his friend replied that Mindy reminded him of the martyr Stephen. Stan wondered momentarily if Tommy had been involved. Who was capable of crashing a worldwide satellite and cable system? How much did Mindy know about the slaughter of her family and the annihilation of the Mollicoat Estate? What effect would her public execution have on the course of the unrest seeming to have overtaken the entire country? These questions swirled in his head ceaselessly until, in frustration, he told them "shut up!" What mattered most of all: where were his children and were they safe? And those questions kept coming back to him while the others faded away without receiving answers.

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Late one night Stan told Peter that he felt restless and wanted to sleep outside. Peter thought this unusual, but said nothing. Stan collected blankets and a pillow and carried them out the door. Next morning, Stan did not show up for breakfast at the usual hour. He was scheduled to work in the woodshop. Peter suggested to one of the boys, a younger brother to Lydia, that he search the yards and barns and report back to him.

In a few minutes the boy entered Peter's apartment where Peter was waiting. "I found him in a panel truck. He is on his way. I think he's drunk."

"Wait here," Peter said and started for the door.

But Stan was just then creeping up to the apartment, sleepy and fragile—as if exerting himself would break him apart. He

grunted to Peter, walked to the sink, and turned on the water. He smelled as if he had not showered for weeks.

"Are you feeling okay?" Peter asked.

Without warning, Stan sat on the floor and lay on his back and his eyes started fluttering. Peter fell to his knees and cried out, his voice a hoarse croak, "Stan, what's wrong?" Thinking Stan was having a seizure, he slipped his arm under Stan's shoulders and glanced around the room looking for a towel to put under his head. Stan's skin was cool and wet.

A few seconds passed and he sat up, stood to his feet, and wobbled into the bathroom.

The boy's face wore a wry expression and he repeated his first opinion. "I think he's drunk. The truck smelled like sour wine."

"You can go to school now," Peter said. "Ask minister Waldner to teach German class for me this morning. Tell him that Stan is ill, which is true, and I need to care for him. Promise that you won't tell anyone about this, please."

The boy squirmed like it would kill him to keep the scandal bottled up.

"Promise me," Peter said, almost threatening. "Stan has suffered. It won't help for people to be talking."

They turned their heads toward the closed door of the bathroom when they heard Stan violently vomiting. Listening to the sound, the boy felt like vomiting himself, and so he promised.

"Good. Run off now, and ask David Waldner to teach German class."

After the boy left, Peter checked on Stan, who had sprawled on his bed. Peter drew a pitcher of water in the kitchenette and brought the water and a glass to the bedside. Stan sat up and sipped from the glass. All the rest of the day Stan alternately slept, sipped water, and vomited. When Peter felt it safe to leave him alone, he found the truck that Stan had spent the night in and cleaned out the putrid blankets and washed the floor. In the truck were three bottles of wine that Stan had taken from the basement of the communal kitchen, two bottles empty and one half-empty. A Bible had vomitus on it. Peter took several hours to clean the truck and handwash and hang up the blankets. It

was not until nearly bedtime that Stan could hold down any water, and he slept the night through.

The next morning, Peter finally asked Stan, "Why?"

"I don't know. It was stupid. I gave up hope. I'm sorry. It will never happen again. It will never happen again."

"I feel sad to think of you all alone in that truck, drinking this wine, poisoning your body, falling unconscious and throwing up all over yourself. You might have died from alcohol poisoning. Your breathing and heart might have stopped. We would have found you dead. It makes me sad to think that you did this without me knowing. I was inside, warm in my bed, sleeping, and there is nothing I could have done to save you."

"I'm so sorry," Stan said, his voice dull and flat. "I will never do this again."

Peter paused a few moments and said, "I believe you. Have you done this before?"

"No."

† † †

During this period, without giving many details, Stan broadly hinted to Peter about Mindy's family's involvement with a worldwide underground government. Peter listened closely and nodded throughout. When Stan concluded by speculating how this might have been related to how Mindy died, Peter cleared his throat and said, "I see. That's the way the world is. You will be safe here, for now." Peter did not show surprise or shock about any of this information or the happenings.

Mr. Chadwick gave Stan a copy of the broadcast recording, and he accepted it gratefully, but as the Hutterites had no means of playing video, he never watched it, nor would he likely watch even if they kept a player. The images of her death would never leave him anyway. It was strange that after his separation from her, and with all the unknowns, her body lay in the grave not far away, near the garden space, near the grave of Peter's wife. So close and so silent.

One frozen winter morning, as he passed the garden, Stan stopped to look at her burial place. The sun shone on the brown grass and soil. Tiny frost jewels of fire sparkled back to him—green, red, yellow, blue, and white. There were hundreds of

them strewn about on the ground, more brilliant and valuable than diamonds . . . But then he thought that his children out there somewhere, if they were alive—*her* children, what remained of her—were more valuable than the whole world.

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The onset of spring brought a dulling of Stan's sharp edge of pain. Now holding no willing thought of ever leaving the colony, he threw himself into work, and Peter cleared the way for him to be his assistant in producing fresh vegetables to supply the colony. After a tough week early in May, when Mindy and Maxwell's birthdays passed unrecognized by anyone but Stan, he looked out from the dark tunnel of depression and saw Lydia still there, the lawnmower girl—she had always been near—and he wondered how he could become acquainted with her. They both had developed the habit of giving each other no regard, not even friendly glances.

Stan knew that Lydia had often worked in the gardens with girls her age and younger, but as soon as Stan began to perform spring garden work regularly and took leadership, while the other girls came for a few hours every other afternoon, Lydia was not among them. Stan wondered about this and thought maybe she was ill, or perhaps she was being kept away from him on purpose.

One evening, as Stan was reading in a chair, Peter looked up from his desk and said, "The Boss and I have been discussing your proximity with the girls. You realize that we have to be careful."

"I do," Stan said. "My wife's family helped me learn prudence in relationships with the opposite sex."

"I can see this. I told the Boss that I would oversee the situation. It is evident that you have a 'green thumb' and would offset work lost if the unmarried women's contributions were limited to planting and harvesting. This way they could be kept separated from you for the bulk of the season."

"I'm not going to be dishonorable." Stan said this without indignation.

"That's not the problem concerning us. I said to the Boss that you might prove to be one of those rare people who join the

Hutterian Church from conviction, become properly married, beget children, and remain in the colony for life—meaning that you might not be a threat to our way of life."

"This is my hope."

"And ours too, for as far as we can see at the present. But we do not tender any illusions about such an outcome. The Boss and I both know of, and have seen firsthand, converts who remained for years and melded well with the colony, and then without warning they left, sometimes abandoning wife and children, sometimes taking them."

Stan could think of nothing to say.

"We and the other men have this fear in mind, and yet in the end, we believe we have to let nature take its course and trust God, taking prudent precautions."

"Thanks for explaining."

"Now, may I trouble you to look at my manuscript for me—the new book on the Hutterites—and comment on my grammar and writing style?"

"I'd love to."

Though Peter did not work in the garden, it was his duty as first minister to supervise the garden work of others. This meant spending an hour a day determining the requirements and giving directions. He and Stan now inspected the garden together, and Peter plied Stan with questions about his personal experiences, and this helped with the book by enabling Peter to contrast the Hutterite life with life elsewhere. For Peter, Stan was a perfect interpreter, because he and Peter had much in common by being alienated from that perilous, corrupting world. Within a short period, Stan took over a large measure of Peter's role as boss over the garden, but not the title, nor the ultimate responsibility. This gave Peter more time to write, which he needed because he also had beekeeping duties.

As spring developed and matured into early summer, Stan planted and hoed, and hauled manure to spread in the rows; he inspected for insects and applied control measures. One day with permission, he and one of Lydia's younger brothers took a pickup to the Tolstoy Ranch and toured their gardens. Stan paid off the loan they had made to him and came back with bundles

of celery plants and fresh ideas; he pored over organic gardening publications. Later, in the warm evenings of June, as he gazed to his future horizons and the early sweet corn grew up past his knees, he saw nothing ahead but days after days such as these, until the end. And when Jacob arrived back from Montana to help with the increased summer workload, Stan was glad to see him after so many months.

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Stan and Jacob had been invited one Saturday evening after supper to the apartment of Lydia's parents to visit and sing, this being an element of the colony's Sunday Sabbath observation, which for them begins at sunset on the day before. Stan, with increasing frequency, had attended these gatherings and did not attribute special significance to the invitation. So far, other than saying "Excuse me" when they passed too near each other, he had never spoken to Lydia, nor had she to him.

Jacob said he had someplace else to go in the evening, and neither Lydia nor her next younger sibling—a sister—were present at the apartment. Stan knew that the young people met weekly for their own social singing, and he confirmed, by a pretended innocent question, that this was where Lydia and Jacob had gone.

Lydia's father, Henry, was the hog man, and he was matched to the job, if for no other reason than his looks, which, if not exactly resembling a pig, had a similar comical aspect that resulted from his broad and deep V-shaped smile and turned-out ears. Lydia's mother, however, bore a classic Hutterite beauty, and her face differed little from Lydia's, except the mother showed wrinkles at her eyes and mouth. The mother's slender figure, cheery manner, and efficient graceful movements around the apartment challenged Stan's suppositions about what the bearer of eleven healthy children would look like.

As Stan knew, the oldest son had started his own family—they lived at the new Trefoil Colony in Canada. There also was a sister married and living with her husband and new baby in the nearby Deerhaven colony. Lydia was the third born, and there was a sister only a year and a half younger than she was. For this particular Saturday singing, the youngest three children were

being cared for next door so the adults could talk, and the middle four children sat around the corners of the room reading books, diffidently prepared to listen, but not to join the conversation.

This evening there were two other couples present who were about Stan's age. After sharing the latest family news around the circle, Lydia's mother handed out song booklets, and everyone sang from them. Their voices sounded the same as in church, that is, slightly nasal, but softer, warmer, and while the subjects of the songs dwelled upon major religious themes of their lives, the words were English. The men then moved into the kitchen while the women continued singing.

Henry brought out a new bottle of wine. "We usually enjoy this only at weddings and distinguished occasions, not counting a sip at communion, but for tonight we'll risk a taste to see how it turned out."

After these past months with them, Stan at last felt more freedom to express his differing views. Around the small kitchen table, he questioned, "Is it really necessary to live with complete community of goods, or isn't it enough to live separately from the world?"

Peter, who ordinarily appeared to be tolerant of slight variations from the intricate code of their material and spiritual lives, slammed his palm on the table, not in anger, but by way of punctuation and said, "We believe that private property is the greatest hindrance to Christian love! That's our fundamental belief." The other men nodded their assent.

"I read in one of Peter's books," Stan said, "a book by a non-Hutterite writer, that you believe a Hutterite who leaves the colony is destined for hell."

"A person is saved by faith, not by works," Peter said. "But someone who leaves the colony often throws away his Christianity, and because of this, we say he is bound for hell, not because of his actual leaving. It's not the leaving that condemns him, but what he does when he leaves."

The other men's response to this was more surprising than Peter's passionate declaration: they laughed. When the laughter diminished, a man whom Stan did not know well said, "You wouldn't want to meet a Hutterite on the street at night, one who left the colony. You might not survive."

Stan could not figure out what this meant and decided he had better discuss it with Jacob later.

They talked on about many subjects, some political, some agricultural, and they joked in simple ways, drawing upon farming life. Then they reviewed problems on the colony and the threat from the wandering bands of robbers in the region, and the latest news from other communities to the north and east—marriages, funerals, the building of new colonies; they referred to their history and told stories about the heroes of the faith. Stan only half listened. Hearing all this, he abruptly felt lonely, isolated, and misplaced. He loved the Hutterites and their rugged lives, their practical ingenuity, their humorous creativity in the keeping and bending of rules, but his heart continued to beat in the world. Life in the colony was a dream and his body asleep alone in a bed somewhere. The voices faded into the background.

The men had fallen silent around him, and Stan raised his eyes. They were looking at him and Peter put his hand firmly on Stan's arm and said, "We pray for you, my friend."

They knew his thoughts.

Stan muttered thanks, rose from his chair, excused himself, and walked out into the cool evening air. A dog barked in the distance. The breeze rustled the trees growing in clusters around the near buildings. The stars burned intensely bright overhead, and a jet's lights flickered as it glided through the jeweled field. Was it a military plane or civilian? Were people watching a movie and reading magazines up there at 35,000 feet? On the ground below, Stan could hear singing coming from three places at once, and the music seemed to rise from the rich fertile earth itself. Stan entered his apartment, undressed, got into bed, and turned out the light without trying to read.

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Sunday passed without any unusual event, and Stan was bored. He wanted to get back into the garden, but he knew that if he didn't take a day off he would not enjoy work, no matter how much drive he had. An enforced fasting from his occupation refreshed his interest. He played outdoor games with the younger children after the midday meal, and this diverted his

brooding thoughts. Later, he took a nap, and read during the evening. Once in bed, he began a letter to Lydia, but after one page he realized that the sharing of his feelings was really written to Mindy, and after four pages, he folded the paper and tucked it into a Bible.

Next morning, he asked Jacob to help him in the garden so they could talk. Jacob arrived an hour before noon. It was with Jacob that he allowed himself to express his deep feelings, and they went straight to the main point, Stan beginning.

"How does a Hutterite man go about courting a girl?"

"Are you ready to marry again?"

"I'm ready to stay on the colony the rest of my life. Marriage would be part of staying here. Mindy is dead, I want to put that life behind me and be healed."

"Don't you think it's too soon?"

"Maybe so. But I have lost everything, everyone. My wife was abducted almost a year ago."

Jacob sighed in sympathy. "Who do you have in your eye?"

"You can't tell anyone, okay? I haven't spoken to her. I haven't spoken to her at all."

"I give my word."

"It's Lydia."

"Lydia?"

"I've been thinking of her from the first day I arrived."

Jacob, who never became flustered, made an obvious facial sign of dismay, but he collected himself and spoke gravely. "You don't know, then. I've been courting Lydia. We walked last night up the southern hill in the starlight, with her younger sister Julianne as a chaperone. It was our first date together. That's why I came to this colony—to find a wife."

Stan backed up to a fencepost and leaned against it. He covered his face with his hands.

Jacob said nothing for a long while. At last he continued, "Here's what I'll do. You're a brother to me and I'll withdraw to let you court Lydia. There are no promises between us, and there is her sister, Julianne. She's younger than Lydia and I like her, too. I'll get to know Julianne, you can court Lydia, and this will be for the best—because you're older, yourself. It's better to marry a younger woman."

Stan stood up from the fencepost and turned to Jacob, who was looking up into the sky. "Don't you have any affection for Lydia? Doesn't she for you?"

"A little, yes. Both ways, I think. But, to be honest . . . more than a little from me—she's an attractive person. But Hutterites live by the Scripture that commands us to live with our wives as if we have none. This is why we don't eat with wives and families, and why we don't sit together during community worship. Everyone in the colony will understand if there's an adjustment, and they'll be amused, too. Better to change now rather than *after* the wedding, which unfortunately happens, rarely though, and not without tears and anguish, and repentance later. No, I think it might be God's will that I court Julianne and marry her, if she'll have me. I've already thought this was best, because there's something that's troubled me."

"What is it?"

"What if you fell in love with a girl who's not a Christian?"

Stan thought back to an eternity ago to his life as a bachelor. He spoke abstractly, "I wouldn't date a girl who's not a Christian—who didn't have a true faith."

"Certainly. But with us it's different, because we live and work with the girl and see her every day. Just because she's a good Hutterite doesn't mean she's a Christian. Some Hutterites live in the colony and don't make trouble, but they have no personal faith."

"So, you're saying this about Lydia?"

"I found out last night when we talked. Also, she wants to leave the colony, not to live crazy, but from curiosity, to see what's to be seen. I've lived outside for seven and a half years, and know my place is here, but my experience wouldn't be enough for her."

"You left the colony?" Stan asked with amazement.

"It's not uncommon for men, and they almost always return. But when women leave, even if they think it's for a short while, they never come back."

"What did you do when you left?" Stan replied, distracted from talking about Lydia.

"You'll probably find my story unbelievable. Let's sit down."

The men moved to a bench near the graveyard. Two children were riding bicycles around and around the enclosed area until Jacob asked them to leave.

"As you know, I grew up in Montana. The colony was near an Air National Guard base. When I was a boy, we always bought the best tractors and machinery made, and when I sat all day in the seat, I watched planes soaring in the distance or blasting overhead, and I wanted to fly one of those planes. When I finished high school, I left the colony and moved to Colorado Springs, and after two years I entered the Air Force Academy. Life there was much like the colony—clean, disciplined, and communal; we wore uniforms there, as here, and the mountains and topography were similar to home. I worked hard and fit in quite well. My training in the colony made it easy for me, because I had learned to subvert my individuality.

"The hardest part was admissions, because before I applied for nomination, I had to make up advanced courses in math and other courses we don't get in the colony school. This took six months, and then the application process took about a year and a half. During that time I lived with a family near the academy, worked a part time job, and took classes at a community college. Later, while I waited for my appointment, I worked full-time as a mechanic at an airfield, and I learned about flight electronics. This family I stayed with more or less adopted me, and on holidays through the academy years, I visited them rather than returning home.

"At the academy, I enjoyed everything except football and chapel. I felt uncomfortable in the crowd at the stadium and only went to a few games my first year. The chapel was a reminder that I shouldn't be there. It's shaped like a rack of fighter jets aiming for heaven. I graduated high in my class, and after flight school, where I also did well, I signed with the Navy, where I picked my assignment and received more training. I flew over Alaska. Stan, it was fantastic, and the mountains and ice, the G's of acceleration and turns, and the adrenaline from speeding faster than sound—those things I'll never forget. There was pride, too, of being inside an elite class of citizens. But when chances increased that I would be assigned to combat, and when the government began hammering down on people, its own

citizens, I became uneasy, and this provoked me to face reality. I was a prodigal.

"Nothing terrible happened—I didn't carouse around—but I realized how empty this life was for me, and I wanted to get married. I always knew I'd return to the colony to marry. While I had female friends during those years, and one a fairly close friend—a classmate—I never had a real girlfriend. After two years' active duty, I was offered a position—a promotion—of flying with a wing that was responsible for signaling the command to begin a nuclear attack from our submarines in the Pacific. Morally, I couldn't be a part of this, and in the Navy, it's up or out, so I applied to the government for a release from my military obligation, and they let me go. They almost never do that."

"It sounds like it was fairly easy, as these things go," Stan said.

"But Stan, if they hadn't given me a discharge, I planned to go AWOL, which would have meant jail if I was caught. My commander knew this, and though he disagreed with me, he respected me, and this is why I was released. He also knew I'd never given up my pacifist views. What drew me to the military was the machinery. I never gave much thought to war. I'm not a complete pacifist, not in my heart, because I still struggle with wanting to defend the colony.

"A problem in being released was that the government wanted repayment for my training. There's no tuition at the academy because the government expects you to serve a certain number of years afterwards as a reimbursement. Quit before your term, and you owe them. So, I wrote to my father explaining that I wanted to come home, but I had debt hanging over my head, about $120,000. He contacted the colonies in our Leut—our branch of the Hutterites—and they took up a collection. I paid for a third out of my savings, but the people of the Leut gave the rest willingly, and my father said it wasn't so much—the colony paid this amount for a grain silo."

Stan contemplated what he had just been told and spoke his thought. "The first day I met you, you changed the tire of an old, beat-up farm truck."

"Yes," Jacob said and laughed.

Both men thought of the contrast between the pickup truck and powerful fighter jets.

"But I belong here," Jacob said.

"Your life and mine are varied, but we have reached the same conclusions."

"And we both are interested in the same woman, eh?" Jacob replied. "But I'm too old and in too much of a hurry to wait for Lydia to come to faith. So you're welcome to court her. You might be more persuasive about finding meaning and purpose in God and submission to his will. Lydia's a pleasant person, but she didn't listen to me last night. She's naïve and stubborn, and I'm impatient."

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Jacob returned to his duties and left Stan to think about his future. He had not considered before that the spiritual war he had tangibly encountered in his previous life would exist in the colony, albeit benignly in a girl who conformed to the most chaste behavior, but who also did not have a relationship with the Creator of those standards. And so Lydia became a mission for him. In the evening, he sent a short letter to her via a child and asked if he might talk with her soon. Immediately after, she began giving him furtive glances across the dining hall or during afternoon church services. Her looks did not express either anxiety or coyness, but shy friendliness and expectation. Stan's heart suddenly swelled with longing each time she looked at him, and he had to quash his feelings. He thought he might receive a note in reply, but nothing came. A few days later, at midmorning, she arrived at the edge of the garden, carrying two empty baskets.

"Will you help me pick summer squash?" she asked without fanfare. With a businesslike manner intended to compensate for his excitement, Stan took one of the baskets and they walked to where the zucchinis and yellow crooknecks grew.

"I've heard a lot about you," Lydia said. "I'm sad about your wife being killed, and it must be terrible not knowing if your children are safe."

Stan took a deep breath and turned away so she could not see the sorrow on his face. Nothing Lydia could have said would

have endeared her to him more than her empathy, which he had not anticipated. Up until now only the colony men and older women had spoken to him about this. When he had mastered his feelings, he said, "It's nice for people of the colony to care."

Lydia did not waste time in small talk, but true to Jacob's accounts, began to ask what it was like outside the colony. Stan did not expect her to take the approach she did. Instead of asking superficial questions about popular culture, she inquired in terms of interest in Stan and his family as she said, "Tell me about your wife. I want to know about her. Was she submissive to you? What kind of things did she like? What kinds of clothes did she wear? Did she wear makeup? Was she pretty?"

And so Stan began to talk about those things that never ceased to occupy his thoughts when the immediate present did not demand his attention. The baskets soon filled, and Lydia straightened up to leave with hers, and Stan carried his beside her to the kitchen.

From then on, Lydia was always among the girls who gathered vegetables from the garden, and she sometimes came alone during the afternoon to help him. She plied him with questions, and after answering, Stan found it easy to ask his own questions back to her. He learned that she completely respected the Hutterite beliefs and thought they represented the ideal way for people to live. Nor was she immature about this, but possessed a deep understanding. She also was well-informed on facts about the outside world. On the other hand, her ideas of that world were unrealistic and childlike. She imagined it to be better and more glamorous than it was, and also not as depraved as it truly was. What alarmed Stan was the combination of her curiosity and innocence, which would make her susceptible to exploitation, if she ever was left without protection.

Stan began to talk to her about belief in God, and she listened patiently; and while they worked in the garden under the sun, he taught her the classic proofs for the existence of God and about the historical veracity of the Gospels. This all was new to her. She asked good questions, but whenever Stan pressed her about what she thought, she answered, "I don't know." Stan concluded that if she had been a young woman living in a mainstream family and had experienced the common hurts of disappointment

and insult that people receive, she might possess impetus to believe in Christ. As it was, her exposure to continuous indoctrination during childhood had dulled the freshness that the adult discovery of truth brings.

The presence of Lydia sometimes by his side in the garden, often in his mind, and always nearby, eased him as the one-year anniversary of Mindy's abduction passed, and also as his and Mindy's third wedding anniversary came and went, and later in August at the date of the Mollicoat Estate destruction. Thus, Stan and Lydia grew close emotionally, though they never touched. The Perseid meteor shower had come and gone, and it was nothing as spectacular as it had been the previous year.

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Stan prepared to be baptized as an adult and join the colony, a prerequisite to marriage for the Hutterites. Lydia, too, under the influence of his perspectives, began expressing a desire to be baptized, as Stan had hoped. Normally, the colony conducted baptisms on Palm Sunday or occasionally on Pentecost Sunday, both dates being in the spring, but since this was a long way ahead, Peter considered making an exception to their custom. First Sunday in Advent seemed possible. By late summer, everyone in the colony assumed that Stan and Lydia would become engaged, though the two had never spoken of this together, nor had Stan spoken to her father, Henry.

One day, however, Lydia came to the garden and stunned Stan by announcing, "I want you to take me away from the colony. You can change your name and get another teaching job, or we can work as farm managers someplace."

Lydia's sudden proposal alarmed Stan and disrupted what equilibrium he had achieved in the few months since Mindy's death. He had found security and peace on the colony and had become resigned to a predictable future of working hard, of prayer, of the rearing of children—a new family—of being surrounded by grandchildren, and of serene passing into old age. Leaving the colony was out of the question! He thought he wanted to marry Lydia someday, but leaving with her was not possible. Alone, he might survive; together, they would be vulnerable—and would they live in abandoned buildings and

under bridges? Stan was a hunted man. She could not conceive of how impossible it would be for him to find work. Unaccompanied, she would be destroyed, and Stan feared that if he did not take her, she might run away.

Being caught off guard and now emotionally upset, Stan replied evasively, "I . . . I need to think about this."

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Once she had introduced the subject, Lydia brought up her plan every time they were alone. Her desire to leave the colony, if only to explore for a year or two, was fixed, and nothing Stan said could shake her determination. He gave every rational argument, and she in reply threatened to leave without him. This was a dilemma too large for him, so he decided to consult Peter. Stan waited for the courage to speak to him. One evening after a day of satisfying labor, he could not bring himself to encroach upon Peter's quiet study as he sat at the desk that held the only light on in his room—a lamp. This was a perfect moment, but as Stan sat nearby in a chair reading a Hutterite history, he felt that raising the subject of Lydia would irreparably break his fragile contentment.

This tension continued for a week, and one evening Peter looked up from his writing and said to Stan, "How's the garden now? Could you spare a half day to help with the bees?"

Stan was agreeable. The next warm day, when the dew had evaporated, he and Peter gathered the necessary equipment, loaded it into a truck, stopped by the kitchen to pick up water bottles and food for a snack, and drove to the bee stands that were positioned at the edge of wooded land.

While Peter would have preferred to have painted the bee boxes white, the nearly twenty hives were green and brown, blending with the natural background. Peter explained, "The colors hide them from human predators. White sticks out a mile." They suited up, Peter lit the smoker, which he had stuffed with dry pine needles for fuel, and he sent up billows of fragrant clouds.

"We're preparing the colonies for winter—bees live in colonies, too. I've thought about the other similarities between honeybees and Hutterites. We both raise big families, we are all

related in a colony, except for a few drones who wander in. When our numbers grow large, we both replicate our communities by dividing—one half leaves with one of the leaders to begin a new home. In bees it is called swarming. And we work in harmony with each other for the common good and lay up stores for our provision."

Peter and Stan chuckled.

The men kept busy for the first hour without further talking, except for what was needed. It was hard to converse because the work took concentration, but also because the bees flying around in confusion produced a great deal of loud buzzing. Peter worked without gloves, but Stan wanted to avoid the invariable stings. Both wore veils. Stan operated the smoker to calm the bees. He removed the rocks that were used to weight down the covers and keep them from blowing off in the occasional strong winds. Peter estimated how much honey each bee box had by hefting their back ends to determine which hives had stores enough to overwinter. The men removed Peter's homemade treatment for parasitic mites from each hive and checked which hives were queen-right by lifting out a frame from the middle and looking for bee brood and eggs. Peter scribbled notes in a small book for later reference.

"What should be done with the queenless hives?" Stan asked.

"I'll show you another day. I add frames with brood and eggs so the bees can raise their own queen."

Peter worked at a leisurely pace and seemed to relish the methodical inspection, ignoring the few angry, high-pitched bees bumping his veil and helmet. Once in a while Peter, took a sting on the hand. He did not flinch or exclaim, but automatically scraped the stinger out with his hive tool and said to Stan, "Give me a little smoke here," and waited for Stan to smoke his hand, thereby masking the alarm scent of the toxin. "Bees maximize their effects by targeting where other bees have stung," Peter explained. Suddenly, he grew serious. "Something else—individual honeybees will flee from danger while in the field, but they sting only to defend the colony—the nest."

Stan was certain that Peter meant more with this last comment than he had said, but if Peter wished not to elaborate, Stan would not ask.

Halfway through their work they stopped for a break and ate rolls with butter and jam while sitting on the tailgate of the truck, parked in shade. Peter ate quickly and before Stan was finished said, "I want to talk with you, and this is why I asked you to help me today. I can't think of the perfect words to say these things, but I trust you'll understand."

Peter delayed beginning. He sorted through his thoughts and then resumed. "There was a time in our history when we went out to people and shared our faith. I believe we should do this again, but I'm not a bishop, and my influence is limited. You've been a satisfactory part of our community, Stan, but you should leave and fulfill the purpose the Lord has for you. These months—almost a year—helped you recuperate and gave you some consolation, but it would be a mistake to settle here now, though I know the world is dangerous for you. Let me explain."

Stan waited as Peter paused for a long minute. "I grew up in the colony and joined the church when I was 20. Soon after, I married; and so I made promises, one to the church and the other to my wife. In the next fifteen years, we had eight children, and I was chosen by lot to be a minister, and I have no reason to complain or be ungrateful. But after my course was set, I came to understand that the promise I made to the church was in conflict with what the Scriptures teach about going unto all nations and making disciples. I've tried to honor my promises and the Lord's calling to serve this people, and I have tried to obey the Scriptures that speak about serving Christ in our neighbors. These I performed by remaining in the colony and by teaching our way of life to others in my books and by giving tours to visitors. But over the years, I've prayed that I'd have the opportunity to travel more and speak, especially at other churches. This has been denied me so far, and my steps remaining to walk in this present world are few.

"For a long while, I saw the problems in the non-Hutterite churches, and it wasn't only materialism, but an overall accommodation to the world. Because of how we live in the Bruderhof without distraction or mental clutter, and with the remote point of view this gives us, I had a clarity about current history—insight shown to be true by recent events. Without looking at the newspapers every day or listening to radio, I still

could read signs of the times from conversations with neighbors and my correspondents. In the late '90s I saw civil war coming, and I knew what would be the causes, and also I understood how it could be prevented. It may be too late, and already the degradation of private morality and governmental violence puts us on the verge of disintegration and chaos. You know this better than I do."

Peter turned his head toward the beehives. "We don't have time for me to explain it all this morning, but I've written my observations—in English."

Stan said nothing. He did not want to think about any of this. Peter continued.

"I'm not certain about all you should do, but one thing's essential: you have children and you mustn't abandon them. Find them, Stan. Try. This, at least, is mandatory for a father, and if you still believe our way is best, then return with your children, or return empty-handed after you've exhausted your search. Then be baptized, marry Lydia—if she's still unattached and willing—and remain here. But there's certainly great menace from this country now . . . If you want to live as a Hutterite, you should move to a *hof* in Canada . . ."

"Do you think I could cross the border now?" Stan asked.

"Perhaps there is something else for you to accomplish," Peter continued. "If you consider your leaving as us sending a missionary, then maybe it won't be as hard for you. You may be an answer to my prayers and go in my place. I have sons, and all are fine men, but none share my vision and burden for the lost of the world."

Stan had listened with reluctance and a feeling of immense portent. He had been caught up in momentous events and had suffered loss and pain, and he carried the constant anxiety of being an enemy of the state. But since he had arrived at the colony, he had pushed this all away; and so the lesser matter of his affections for Lydia dominated his response to Peter's words. He was embarrassed because Peter had spoken so naturally about Lydia and him.

Peter guessed Stan's mind and said, "There are few secrets on the colony."

"Then you also know that Lydia has been tempted to leave? I'm afraid for her. She wants novelty and adventure, and the good things out there."

"This is another reason you must go. Once you're gone, the temptation will be removed, because she'll have lost the means, and she may or may not wait for you to return. Other men will take an interest, unless you make a pledge to each other before you leave, which I don't recommend."

Stan knew he must leave, though he did not fully comprehend why. He accepted it the same as when he was sent away from the teaching job he loved. Anyway, all the while in the colony he had been expecting dismissal; he knew that he did not belong here. His emotions revolted, but there were no more arguments to make. He could run no longer. The deaths of his wife and in-laws, and so many others who had given their lives, demanded that he continue what they had attempted, or that he take their battle into new ground. Stan also saw the wisdom of being unattached to Lydia by any but a bond of friendship, but there remained a pestering matter about Lydia, one Peter did not fully understand, and he spoke about this passionately.

"I'm afraid for Lydia, because if I do not take her away, she'll leave anyway and walk if she has to. She is resolved. If I stay here I might prevent her, but if I go, she may follow me."

"Oh! I didn't know it had gone so far."

Peter stared at the ground for a long while. At length he raised his head, cleared his throat and said, "There may be a cure for this wanderlust—a temporary cure. I said there are few secrets, but this must be one. Take Lydia to Spokane for a day and show her what's what. You should also take Jacob—and Julianne for a companion for her sister. Let Lydia experience the beauty of the city, but also show her the dregs. This will prepare her a little for your departure. I'll make the arrangements and speak with the girl's father. What do you think?"

"I don't want to leave," Stan replied slowly, "but my hopes for staying have been illusionary. I'm still bound to the wilderness outside. I've always thought I needed to learn where my children are. And I see the sense of taking Lydia for a day to experience what it is like. It might be an effective inoculation. It's worth a try, but you know, maybe she would become

infected and desire more. A day isn't much, but it gives us a chance to say goodbye."

"There's always a risk. But aren't you sure she'll run away if we don't try this?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Pretty sure."

"I wonder . . . But we should try our plan. I'll talk with Henry, then I'll prepare everything, if he agrees." Peter stood up and stretched. "Let's finish our bee work."

† † †

The next evening, when prayer and dinner were done, Peter, who had eaten in the dining room with the other adults, walked with Stan to their apartment. The air, cool on their faces, anticipated the end of summer and the coming senescence of fall. On the way, Peter spoke in a low voice saying that everything was arranged for their Spokane expedition. This was not a simple matter, since colony morality presented two ironclad and opposing conditions on reporting certain kinds of personal activities. First, one could not lie. Second, one could not tell the whole truth. For Jacob and Stan, who had long looked after themselves, little explanation was necessary: "You have business in Spokane," Peter said he would announce to inquirers.

"For the girls," he continued, "there must be a specified reason for their absence. All the women and girls in the colony will, as a matter of course, expect to know why, and we decided that Lydia and Julianne should be visiting their brother and his wife for two weeks at Trefoil Colony in Alberta, and this they will do. The subterfuge—we must be honest with ourselves—is concealing a layover in the city within the length of the journey. The plan throws in a complication: Henry will be going along. You young men shall leave early in the day in a pickup, and the girls and their father leave later in a van."

Stan was tired and could hardly listen to Peter for sleepiness, and this late in the day the plans did not seem workable, but he said nothing. *In the morning it might sound better*, he thought.

"Well, that's settled," Peter said. "Now for your mission after Spokane. This will help you, I believe." Peter brought out two handmade books and gave them to Stan. "I have placed scraps of paper as bookmarks in the places I want you to read."

Stan took the books to his reading chair in the sitting room corner. Peter retired to his bedroom. Stan weighed the first book in his hand. The craftsmanship was of high quality and the binding tight for having been written in for over a decade. He began at page one, but within a few minutes, after attempting Peter's neat block printing four or five times, his head sagged and he slept.

An hour later, Jacob entered. He put a blanket over Stan, turned out the light, and went to bed. Some hours deeper into the night, Stan awoke with a jump and lifted up his head, which had been leaning against the back of the chair. He had heard a noise that ceased once he had gained consciousness, or the echo of a noise. Maybe he had been snoring. The room was silent except for the ticking of the wall clock across the room. The air felt stuffy, and he rose and pulled a goose down comforter out from a closet next to the kitchenette and found a flashlight in a drawer. His arms laden with the blanket and the bulky comforter that kept trying to slip out, and clutching Peter's volumes and the flashlight, he bundled out the back door onto the covered patio. He arranged himself in a corner chair, wrapped up in the warm layers, and began turning pages.

Stan skimmed the words to catch the essence of the passages that he picked at random. Much of it interested him. Notes about daily life in the colony, about a trip to Mexico and another to New England, reflections about current events, narrations describing the births of Peter's last children, and then he came upon the first bookmarked passage, dated May 3, 1989:

> The news is the same day after day, of wars and rumors of wars, famines, droughts, and earthquakes. The Bible says there is nothing new under the sun, and if this is true, when the newspapers say they have "news" then they lie. It is possible, however, to read between the lines. It is impossible to believe that what the papers say is accurate or unbiased, but it is enough to know that something is going on, even if it is opposite to the reports. By this news, I can read the signs.
>
> One subject springs from the newspaper pages. None of the other events of the day approach the import of this

> phenomenon. I would never imagine such a thing—a woman rips her own offspring from her womb, and this apparently occurs thousands of times each day. In the Scriptures, miscarriage is a curse, and to rip open a pregnant woman is the most horrendous act man inflicts upon others, but we have the politicians and Hollywood starlets speaking about abortion as a good and a right. Truly, the world is in rebellion against God and there will be a judgment. Many people will be hurt.

Stan turned the pages, passing over the recorded valuables of Peter's abundant, cloistered life, and passing over his thoughts, wherein he viewed the affairs of men with bluntness, tempered by a serenity arising from love of people and a persevering trust in God. Stan moved into the pages of 1990 and found the following marked entry from midsummer:

> The "pro-life" people squander their energy rallying in Washington. The news is about how many numbers came to their gathering, as if this is the significance. Who cares what Christian people think, if they will not *act* upon what they believe in the simplest manner of loving the children who are being carried to the *lagers,* the same as they love their own children? Perhaps the love they have for their own children is deficit, because most pro-life people accept the standard that God's blessing of children must be artificially managed and limited. The Scripture rings true when it says no one understands. The reasons for contraception are the same for aborting children. The quality is the same; only the degree is different.
>
> The peaceful sit-ins across the country during the past two years come closest to following the way of Jesus, who healed on the Sabbath, which, according to man's tradition, was "work", and thus illegal. (Private property was never intended by God as a protection for murder, and a Christian is not trespassing when he enters another's property to save lives.) If this rescue movement continues and grows, the nation could be

> turned around. But the leaders of this movement—bold, intelligent, and idealistic—are immature and care too much about statements and headlines. The government persecutes the rescuers and the price of saving lives is more than they are willing to pay. Pastors and elders bow to their fears and keep their distance from the young rescuers, thus withholding the wisdom and support they could offer. Perhaps they once were good, but rallies and marches at places other than where the children are murdered are confessions of hypocrisy and defeat.

Stan turned more pages, and his eye fell upon this single unmarked entry, dated March 12, 1993:

> I see further violence ahead.

He went on leafing through the pages, expecting to find more comment on violent incidents, but there was nothing else noted in the first book. He opened the second at the bookmark, which was at the final entry of the volume, written on April 16, 2002:

> The shootings and firebombings came, as I anticipated. Remarkably, there are not more, but I am afraid that the general violence will increase as society decomposes, because the government will crack down to restore the order necessary for it to hold power, and people will rebel, either for right or wrong reasons. Those inside the culture will not notice change, because for them it is like movement of the hour hand of a clock that they are watching. But for us who rarely look at the neoteric world's clock, we see the change vividly. I have a solution and an answer, but who would listen? It requires a repenting of those of us who call ourselves Christians, or "pro-life," from our lack of love for the preborn—even those who think themselves leaders in the anti-abortion movement. Without exception, all of us must repent.
>
> This is the answer: when someone in the colony is sick, whether it be a child or an adult, those who love the

person will visit him in the hospital. Or, as I imagine, if one of us is in jail, we will visit the prison, and if we are not permitted to enter, we will hold a vigil outside. This is loving ourselves, because our friends and relatives are part of us. Strangers are in the category of our neighbors, and most pre-born children are strangers. The simple conclusion is: if we love children in the womb as ourselves, we will go to the locations—the prisons—where they are to be executed. We will hold vigils outside. If we pro-life people fail in this basic act of love, we will fail in a large measure at everything else—including in our own families and marriages. It is essential to love the mothers of those children and help them in every way possible, because to help the mother, you also help the baby, and she should be loved for her own sake as well, or rather for Jesus' sake. But those prisons where the babies are killed . . . they are public and known, and there is no other place to be with those children, so we must be with them there, the same as we would visit our own children.

Christians and others who refuse to bring their presence to the killing places are the priest and the Levite in the Good Samaritan story. They pass by on the other side to avoid helping the man in the ditch—he who had been robbed and left for dead. Indeed, most people who say they are pro-life stay away from the roads that pass by the abortion places. A whole generation says, "We are pro-life. We are pro-life," and says to the pre-born about to die, "Be well, keep warm and well fed," but they do *nothing* for them—nothing for those about to die, not even to stand by and mourn their passing. The visible church is asleep and thinks it is awake. And I myself, by staying in the colony, pass by on the other side. "I have duties," I say. "I have responsibilities and commitments. I do not wish to be associated with rabble-rousers. I have excuses." Doesn't everyone? (I am no better than anyone, and because I understand, I am worse.) For me to treat the killing of pre-born children as being abnormal would mean that I could not live life with my

> church and family. I would be ostracized and end up in jail. Therefore, we have to pretend it's not happening, don't we? The dues we pay for living as we want to live is to tolerate the murder of innocent children.
>
> If those of us who follow Jesus will not treat children who are not-yet-born as *children* in the simplest ways, and if we will not love them as our own children, as Jesus commands, then it will be impossible for *anyone else* to believe and act like they are children, and therefore the killing will continue. Judgment will fall.
>
> There is no other present evil of the magnitude of this slaughter, and if civilization slides into another dark age, even if only temporarily (as in Europe in the middle of the past century) let the reader understand, it will be because of this failure of integrity, this loss of saltiness, which is the preserving quality brought by the presence of Christ's true body. The civil war in this country in the 1800s was provoked by God's wrath against a grievous injustice. Large wars are a result of small evils accumulated. All this we should expect, and it does not surprise us, and yet we wish it not to be. The essential work for Christians is not to be concerned about the movements of the starry hosts, history, and the future, but to fulfill the purpose for which we were created—responding to the challenges before us. Our duty for the colony is to present a mountain of love and sanity to which men may flee, and yet there is a need for some of us to go tell where we may be found.

Stan turned toward the end of the book. There, more pages described deterioration and failure. One line jumped out: "The South Dakota colonies say their neighbors are talking about secession from the federal union."

A later entry said:

> Public opinion seems to be changing. More people say that they are "pro-life," but in reality, fewer people are

> willing to do anything significant about abortion. The moral compromise of permitting abortion to continue numbs the conscience and leads to the loss of urgency, or to put it simply—to paralysis.

Pages later, the last noted line said, cryptically: "Those who know the truth and who could speak are bribed into silence." He reached blank pages and flipped back to the final entry, which was only, "Annie my dear wife entered the Presence today."

Stan closed the book and took in the scene before him—trees and flowers, dim light, and clean morning air. Peace and order. Birds had begun warbling, but all else was quiet. The darkness he had met when he first came onto the patio had weakened, but full day remained distant, and he heard a door close somewhere.

Peter was right about the essential need for keeping vigil at the abortion sites, and somehow Tommy—especially Tommy—and Dr. Sterne and their underground government members, and Mindy, as far as he knew, were mistaken—or at least their ideas and acts were incomplete. While they had practiced a kind of physical protection and application of justice, they lacked the facet of nurture and warmth for the children and mothers going inside the death camps. Here was the missing idea, the truly human act, the only one that ever had the potential to avert catastrophe. But what could be done now? It was too late. The opportunity to avoid war, widespread suffering, and pain had been lost. What could he, Stan Timmons, only one person, do now? And now, survival alone was difficult enough. At least one thing was clear. He could no longer remain in the colony, not until he had attempted to discover the trail of his own children, despite the risk of being apprehended. He could not be human and at peace until he tried to find them, and afterward, if they could not be found, there was more to do before he could retire from the world . . . It was too hard. He would think about it later—he could not escape thinking—but for today, this morning, it could be forgotten.

Stan hung the blankets over chairs for the dew to dry; he left the books on the table inside, washed, and walked to the kitchen for an early breakfast. There was much garden work to finish before the final errand of taking Lydia to Spokane on the

weekend. Then afterwards he would leave. In the afternoon, Stan borrowed the truck and drove to Mr. Chadwick's, where he spent a couple hours talking with him and exploring the Internet to help decide where to go and by what route to get there.

That evening before nightfall, he and Peter met at the bench near the cemetery plot. Peter said, "You can tell me anything, Stan, if you want. We're not afraid." And Stan told him everything. In hushed voices, they discussed details of the Sterne family's involvement in the Chinook Assembly and the underground government, the part Stan played, the last conversation he had with Tommy, and Stan's impending departure.

At last, Peter brought the conversation to a close by saying, "Let me tell you a story to guide you in what's to come. Some years ago, I went to Nelson Chadwick's home one night. He had told me about a program on educational television, and I wanted to see it. The program was mostly in German, with subtitles, and the subject was German military officers who had conspired to assassinate Hitler. The program was interviews of people who had been directly involved. One man's story was striking. He said he had been in forces fighting on the Eastern Front, and he saw there an odd sight—a long line of men and women standing naked in the cold, being guarded by soldiers. He came closer to investigate and was shocked to his core. The naked people were being forced into a pit, and there they were shot. The pit was full of bodies, some moving. Voices cried from the wounded who had not perished. This German officer said he became enraged, and his impulse was to grab a machine gun from these murderers, his fellow solders, and kill them, but he realized, he said, that he would be killed himself the next instant, and his rescue would be ended in futility. From this moment, he knew that Hitler was an evil man who must be stopped.

"Next, the German officer's wife came on. She said her husband had grown up in the church—they were Catholic—and believed it was wrong to kill, because of the commandment. But she said he reasoned this way: the German nation led by Hitler was already butchering innocent people. To kill Hitler was to stop the killing, and this was how her husband came to join a plot to kill Hitler, which failed, as we know.

"The officer came back on the screen. He said that, for years after the war, he felt sadness and confusion, because he didn't understand what he should have done when he saw people herded into the pits. After a long while the answer came, and Stan, I believe this is the answer. It's always been the answer. It's not organizing, or fighting, or locking criminals into jail. God uses those for his purposes, but they are not the means by which men work out their salvation in the face of a monstrous horror that they are helpless to stop. This is what that German officer discovered when he was older. When he saw the people herded naked into the pits, he said, *'Ich hätte mich ausziehen und mit in die Reihe stellen sollen.'*"

Peter paused for Stan to work out the German.

"He should have undressed himself," Stan said, "and . . . stood with the line."

"He should have taken off his clothes and joined the line of people being shot. Because this is Christ's way. Jesus removed his clothes and climbed onto the cross. Other men's hands stripped and crucified him, but, as the Son of God, he permitted it to happen. Your troubled life, Stan, has led you to understand this better than most men are capable. And when you study heroes and martyrs of history, they were caught in events beyond their control, apart from their decisions. When men rebel against the sacrifices that obedience requires, God takes away the good things men cherish which hold them from sanctification. The best fertilizer for spiritual growth is not singing and dancing, but suffering, tribulation, sickness, and loss. God takes away the enjoyment of this life so that we will strive for eternal joy. You've lost very much, Stan, but it's been for a reason. You shouldn't try to regain a wife, a family, stability, and calm. I believe this. Besides, no one can say the colony will keep these. We may all be arrested, or invaders may attack, so even here there's no guarantee. What the Lord is confronting you with is how you'll respond to the crisis of . . . of this slaughter of innocents in abortion. I'll make it clear: against your will and by force, God freed you from family responsibilities. He asks you now to freely give up this family you have with us. He's asking you to fulfill your purpose."

Stan remembered Mindy's mother making a similar comment years ago on the deck overlooking the Columbia River. He did not hesitate before he said, "Want to know my answer?"

"We wish to aid you, if we're able."

"I'm not noble or heroic. I can't see myself volunteering to be crucified. But I'm willing to step closer and see from there if I have the strength to go further."

Peter took his arm. "This is all you can do, and it's enough for now." Peter paused and then asked, "What will you tell Lydia?"

"I don't know. I plan to talk with her tomorrow."

***Protest signs from the early 1990s.***

*The house, owned by the vice president of the United States, is situated on a hillside overlooking the ocean. I have been hired to solve two problems. One is an exposed septic system. The system has had so much water flushed through it that the water eroded the soil into a network of deep caves open to the surface. Filling with gravel and soil will solve this problem. The other problem is the basement has been flooding with saltwater, which subsequently evaporates, and this apparently has happened often enough that the basement is full of thick salt slurry. There was no chance whatever that the ocean rose high enough to flood the basement, and so my conclusion is that someone piped the water in intentionally. A temporary solution is simple—to shovel out the slurry and wash the basement floors with fresh water.*

**–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons**

***Twenty-six Lambs of Christ shut down this abortion site in Asheville, NC by locking themselves together inside. March 1991.***

## Chapter 25
# Shadows of Death

"Ever since I can remember, I've wanted to leave the colony and explore. I love my family, but the colony is a prison. Why won't you take me with you? We can find a minister and marry right away. I can help you, and I don't care about danger."

Lydia said this and words like these in endless repetition as she and Stan strolled along a dirt road at a field's edge after dinner the next day. She spoke in a flare of anger; she also spoke dispassionately, objectively. She spoke through tears, not angry tears, but as an outpouring of feeling inexplicable to Stan. Nothing he could reply moved her from her desire to leave. He tried to give her hope that he might return, and then the colony elders would give them permission to travel to other colonies once they were married. She saw the reasonableness of his objections and said his alternative was "attractive," and yet she still wanted to go away now, without waiting. Stan realized he was powerless to influence her—after all, *he* was leaving the colony—and he hoped some event or force might intervene to change her heart.

The only way to end the argument was to change the subject, and this Stan attempted by asking for her advice, saying, "What do you think? I'm not sure exactly where I should go."

"Then *why* are you going?"

"I'd ask you the same question. You've expressed yourself about leaving, but what would you do? Where would you go? This is becoming annoying."

"We don't need to quarrel," Lydia said.

"I agree. Do you believe that I should stay in the colony?"

"No, neither should I." Lydia held up her hands in entreaty. "Let's—"

"Wait! You aren't going. We've discussed this enough!"

Lydia gave up for the moment. "I understand. Let's discuss what you'll do. Go back to your home and look for someone

who might know what happened to Maxy and Chysanthe. Ask the neighbors. Who could you talk with?"

"I don't know who's alive or dead, or hiding."

"Then find out."

"I need to look at the Mollicoat Estate—the place that was bombed, where Mindy's family lived—where we lived before she was kidnapped. I have to see it for myself. And afterwards? When I find out nothing? I'm not sure."

"Come back and get me."

"And then what?"

"We can smuggle ourselves across the Canadian border. We'll find a Mennonite community in the world where it's safe, and we'll hide there, live quietly, and raise a family."

Here Lydia paused, and a pensive look stole over her face. "I'd like to go swimming someday. We live near water and I never have done that . . . and . . . I can learn to sing harmony. I've always wanted to sing better and to learn the guitar."

Stan had never before heard about her interest in the guitar or swimming. He suspected that Lydia had cherished these childlike desires for a long while, but he set this aside because of what he intended to say. "What about following Christ and serving Him in our neighbors? Can we run away from trouble and live only for ourselves?"

"In their history the Hutterites fled. They moved to North America from Russia. *You* ran away for a season."

"But is this when we should flee? Or is there something we should do first?"

Lydia was stumped. "When . . . when are you leaving?"

"Saturday after next. I thought to leave this weekend, but I want another week before I cast myself back into the world."

"And that's when we're going to Spokane?"

"Yes."

They had been walking slowly side by side, and Lydia stopped, took his arm, and turned to face him. She was tempting him, maybe on purpose. Stan longed to embrace her, but he swallowed and willed himself to turn away; he started across the rough-ploughed field and quickened his pace. To hold her would only trouble him further.

She caught up, put her hand on his elbow and struggled along beside him, holding her skirt up with the other hand to keep it above the clods of earth. "I was only going to say, Stan, you should learn about your children and join them. And I want to go with you. Please take me. Please. If you leave without me, I'll follow you. They'll have to restrain me."

Stan did not answer but could only think *no no no*. He pulled away from her and walked faster. He had already lost Mindy; he did not want to lose her, too. If she went with him, he could not defend her, and if he were caught, where would she go? Back to the colony with the government on her heels? Or she might be arrested—could she endure imprisonment? If she stayed here he could always dream of coming back to the peace and security. If she left with him, he would lose the goodwill of the colony. The highest path for her was obedience.

They walked back to the houses with both of them unhappy, she a few steps behind him.

† † †

The last week at the colony passed sedately, but the remaining number of days made departure no easier, rather, they prolonged the agony. Lydia withdrew from Stan, and he did not know if she had resigned herself to their separation and was trying to make an emotional break from him, or if she kept aloof so as to not give clues about a stratagem to follow him. At night in bed, Stan tried to relax while he searched his memories for Assembly members who might be alive, or possible members.

On the morning of the Spokane excursion, they left in two parties as arranged, Stan and Jacob in a pickup and the others in a van. During the drive, Lydia and Julianne changed clothes so as not to be recognized as Hutterites, though in their long pretty skirts they appeared unusual, nonetheless. For the first time in their lives, they did not wear a head covering outside the vicinity of their apartment. This was Peter's idea to teach them what it might be like no longer being a Hutterite—the head covering symbolizes submission and protection. When the girls were children, their mother braided their hair outside the door in the yard and let them play, but when they went anywhere they always had worn their distinctive scarves tied closely under the

chin. Today the girls did not feel liberated, but disrobed and lost, like timid puppies who find that their leashes are not attached to their collars. Their father, Henry, also had modified his garb to blend in for the day—no suspenders, and he did not wear a hat. Jacob donned a shirt and pants borrowed from Mr. Chadwick, and Stan wore clothes that one of the men had picked for him at a secondhand store during a market trip—gray canvas pants, a plaid long-sleeved shirt, and a dark hooded sweatshirt. Stan was already packed and ready to leave before daybreak, though he was to return that night after Spokane and finally depart from the colony the following morning.

They met in the parking lot of a bank where the Hutterites conducted their financial business. The eight-passenger van in which they now traveled had side windows in the back; most other colony vans were service vehicles that the Hutterites used to transport supplies or people, irrespective of comfort. Julianne took the front passenger seat and silently watched everything pass by. Jacob sat on the second bench alone, talking with Henry, who drove. Stan and Lydia in the back looked from the windows and commented upon the changes in topography, the crops and irrigation systems, the breeds of cattle, any new construction. Lydia showed no sign that this would be their last day together; instead, she seemed eager and animated, enjoying the outing. Their first adventure for the day was the Sterling Railroad Amusement Park, an hour northeast of Spokane, into Idaho. After some miles, Henry made a quick left turn off the highway onto a side road.

"Where are you going?" Stan called to the front.

"There was a military checkpoint farther along," Jacob answered for Henry. "We'll go around."

The government had instituted these at the beginning of the year, but they had not yet affected Stan, who had seldom traveled away from the colony. Of course, at the checkpoints the National Guardsmen inspected IDs. Stan had given his driver's license and all his identification to Malcolm Williams, but he knew that if military police stopped him, he might be recognized.

They arrived at the amusement park shortly before it opened. The immense park was set along an exquisite lake and landscaped naturally, with rolling hills, rocks, and patches of

pines all around. The air was bright and dry, with fall sunshine accentuating the contrast between the trees and their long shadows stretching out over the brown grass. The park's theme was the Old West, and the five people who had arrived from a culture alien to entertainment meandered through the grounds, observing the growing crowd with disbelief and shock. After months away from the trappings of contemporary life, Stan felt repelled by them, and he wondered how things had become so much worse than he remembered. Yes, society had degraded in the span of a year, but also his isolation had weaned him from the illusion that the mainstream culture was in any way healthy.

What struck him hardest was not the omnipresence of scantily clad women, some very fat, wearing less than what had been the rule, nor their makeup, skin graffiti, body furnishings and ornaments; nor was it the smoking of cigarettes by children who roamed in gangs viciously pushing each other, under the watchful eyes of the black-attired and cowboy-hatted security guards—the children yelling above the din of banjo music blaring across public address speakers; nor was it what seemed to be a new fashion for men to dye their skin a dark rouge, covered with thin traces of white paint; nor was it the prevalent percussion in ordinary conversation of coarse words and expressions that had been rude to use publicly in the days when he taught school. None of these things impacted him as much as the vulgar expressions on the faces, even on those who did not adorn themselves with bizarre accouterments. There were rare families with happy and obedient children. But Stan was shaken by how the faces of nearly everyone bore stress, or weariness, or self-indulgence, or arrogance, or excess, or cruelty, or the surfeit of pleasure; and Stan's awareness was intensified because of the difference from the disciplined, peaceful faces he was familiar with in the colony.

This sharpened perception diminished as they walked about and discussed what rides to take and began to partake somewhat in the spirit of the day.

Only somewhat. The amusement park held no charms for Stan or Jacob, who said privately to Stan, "I'm already bored, and impatient to get out of here."

The place was trivial compared to the struggles Stan had been running from and now returned to, to confront. The park and the whole day was, however, a part of the larger plan—a weird interlude, a final fun day doing something special and trivial with two children, really. It was the same as men through the ages have done prior to leaving loved ones and sweethearts to go to war. He decided to appreciate the day for the girls' sakes.

After a tour of the grounds, they decided to pick one ride, eat a sandwich, and then pass on to the next stage of their daylong jaunt. The most obvious ride was the largest of the three rollercoasters—a seven-acre monster called Whirlwind, with a 285-foot drop. It loomed over the park. The girls had never ridden anything of this sort, even on a small scale. Lydia was eager to try it, but Julianne said she did not wish to, and neither did Henry. He opted for the Ferris wheel, which he said would be "novelty enough to write home about."

They purchased tickets, and as they and the other expectant Whirlwind riders waited in line, Jacob tried to describe to Lydia what the rollercoaster might be like, based on his fighter jet experience, but she did not appear to be listening. However, with a greater knowledge and imagination, Stan was nervous. He would rather have ridden the Ferris wheel, but he thought if he did not go with Lydia she might opt for the Ferris wheel, too, and he wanted her to have the more severe experience as part of her cure.

As they were fastened into the bucket of the front car, a numbing fear crept over Stan. He became possessed with certainty that the rollercoaster would kill them. The scene went out of focus; he took several deep breaths and prayed. He reached to Lydia beside him and took her hand. She squeezed it and smiled. She was not afraid. Stan twisted around to look back at Jacob alone in the car behind them. He grimaced and flicked his eyebrows up and down once. The cars lurched forward and began to climb. The view of the mountain-rimmed valley expanded as the park shrank below. By the time the train reached the pinnacle, Stan had relaxed and given up care of what happened to him. The park had never had a coaster accident, and Stan knew that all things would be well, whether they lived or died. It was only a rollercoaster—safer than riding a car on the

highway. He could now enjoy the thrill from forces to which his earthbound body had been unaccustomed, and share this with Lydia.

He met her eyes and was startled. A few seconds ago she glowed with happiness, but now her face was pale and clammy. Her eyes stared ahead and stood wide open. The car hesitated for three seconds at the precipice, and Stan thought there was an electrical problem with the coaster. Then suddenly they tipped over the edge and plunged with a deafening racket and a sickening sensation of weightlessness. Stan's butt lifted off his seat. Someone screamed and he looked to Lydia again. She was screaming uncontrollably in mortal terror. The coaster swept steeply counterclockwise and rolled in a corkscrew spiral. With a huge effort, Stan pried his hand from the grip in front, put an arm around Lydia, and held on tight as the coaster car leveled, preparing for a backward loop. Lydia stopped screaming, but her body was as rigid as a corpse. Stan said soothingly, as he thought, but in reality he was shouting, "Don't worry! We're okay! It'll be over! It'll stop!"

Stan could only endure the remainder of the ride, which seemed would last forever, though from start to finish it was less than four minutes. When the coaster braked and rolled up to where they began, Lydia lost a little stiffness. When the crewman released them, she scrambled out with amazing speed for wearing a skirt and collapsed face-down on the asphalt. She pushed herself up to her knees, heedless of the grinning crowd of people. Stan knelt beside her and put his hand on her back. Jacob gave her his handkerchief, which she did not need, and when she seemed recovered enough to move, they helped her up by the elbows and asked the ticket taker where she might lie down. He nodded in the direction of the first-aid station. Not satisfied with the meager assistance, Jacob flagged a black-shirted employee who was buzzing by in an electric cart, and the employee gladly took Lydia and Stan to the station, while Jacob went to find Henry and Julianne.

The first-aid station nurse showed Lydia a cot to lie upon in a tiny room along a hall, and the nurse covered her with a woolen blanket. Stan sat in a chair nearby and felt ashamed about his scheme to disenchant her from the world's allurements. It was

working too well. She was lying on her back staring up at the ceiling, her face blanched, tight, and shiny like a wet cadaver's.

"I'm so sorry about this, Lydia. I shouldn't have let you ride the roller-coaster."

She moistened the inside of her mouth, wetted her lips with her tongue, and said weakly, her voice hoarse, "There's no harm done. I know what you're doing. I'm not stupid. I'm not a child."

"You know?" Stan asked, amazed and embarrassed.

"I know you're right. It will help me be content waiting for you. I didn't want the rollercoaster, but thought I should scare myself. I was overconfident—if I better anticipated the fear, I'm sure I wouldn't have gone berserk. No, it wasn't only the rollercoaster that didn't interest me; I didn't want the amusement park at all. I would have been content to walk through the city with you, have dinner and hear a concert, but I had to taste this fruit to know its poison—it represents dangers in the world. I know you must leave . . . and . . ." Her voice trailed off with, "I cannot go." She shut her eyes, which brimmed over with tears. Stan scooted close by the cot and took her hand.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. Her cheeks began to flush faintly as she said, "I'm ready to go back to the colony now—to visit in Montana, I mean. I've learned what you wanted me to learn. I knew it already. There are more dangers than death or pain, and these are our impulses and desires. I won't try to follow you, but if you need me, write, or call on the telephone, and I'll join you wherever you are. You're a good teacher, Stan. But while we are together, let's do a few nice things this last day."

Stan yearned to hug her closely. But it was best to refrain, to help make their parting easier and keep their memories stainless, because there might be years of remembering, and so as always, Stan held back. The temptation broke when Jacob, Henry, and Julianne entered the room. Lydia smiled at them. "I'm ready to get up now, but I've been enjoying resting here."

"I suppose you explained what happened," Stan said to Jacob. "I'm still a little dizzy myself."

They left the first-aid station and walked around a while longer. Stan had seen a clock, but his more astute inner

chronometer had already informed him of the lateness of the morning. Lydia needed no more "lessons" at the amusement park, and he was anxious to get away from there, and all of them began to feel hungry. Jacob recalled an exotic sandwich shop near the entrance.

As they moved in that direction, a large man wearing a short-sleeve, white- and rose-colored shirt converged upon them. He looked as though he would pass on their left, but at the last instant he stepped in front of them and held out a small square of paper. His hair was black and matted in the sweat of his forehead. He smiled dolefully, revealing straight dark spaces between his front teeth. "This's for you. We never know when we'll leave this ol' world."

Stan took the paper and thanked the man, who continued walking. The paper was a pamphlet. On the front was black and red ink, the red being blood pouring from a man hanging on a cross, except that the artist had lopped off the man's arms and cut his body off below the torso. The caption on the bottom read, "All This I Did for Thee." When Stan began to tuck the pamphlet into his shirt pocket, one of the cowboy security guards snatched it as he rushed past. Stan whirled around following the movement, as did Jacob and the others, and they watched in alarm as the guard and three others like him tackled the evangelist and dragged him to a blank doorway in a nearby building, his heels trailing in the dust.

A short man in a neat suit and red tie advanced to Stan's party. He smiled broadly and said, "I'm so sorry about the commotion. We've warned this fellow not to trespass on park grounds. Oh, and here's your flyer. I regret the zeal of our guard." The man gave Stan a piece of paper and sped away. Stan stared. It was not the pamphlet, but a coupon for a free ostrich burger at the shop to which they headed.

Disturbed by the treatment of the guerilla evangelist, the five of them decided to eat someplace on the way back to Spokane.

The itinerary for the remainder of the day was full and varied. They strolled through a shopping mall, toured an art museum, drove through a section of town littered with bars and casinos and staked out by stylish prostitutes, and they circled around into the surrounding slum. They ate at a fancy French restaurant, and

finally, without Henry—who drove to the hotel with the pickup and checked in—the couples attended an opera, at which Stan and Lydia held hands until Stan fell asleep.

Afterwards, they took the van to the hotel to say farewell. On the way, Stan and Lydia sat on the second bench of the van and Stan put his arm around her shoulders. Henry did not come down to the lobby, and there Jacob shook Julianne's hand and stepped outside the main entrance to wait. Julianne got onto the elevator and held the door open for Lydia, but changed her mind and let it close. Lydia put out her hand to shake Stan's, and when he took hers, he leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "Goodbye, Lydia. God protect you." He turned and walked away.

Lydia stood where she was and called out, "Stan."

He was near the outside door and turned back around.

"I love you, Stan," she whispered.

"I love you, too."

"Come back soon."

"I will, if I can," Stan said, and then he stepped outside. Lydia stood watching through the windows until he rounded the corner. She walked around the lobby aimlessly for a few minutes, suppressing sobs, and stopped to stare at the television. Then she pushed the button for the elevator.

Jacob and Stan drove the pickup back to the colony and Stan went to bed.

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The next morning before daybreak, Jacob woke him. Stan showered and put on the thrift store clothing he had worn the day before. Jacob placed Stan's duffel bag into the back of the pickup. Stan kept a small backpack with him. It was a windy day. They reported to the dining hall, where Lydia's mother had prepared breakfast for them. While the men were eating, she put her hand on Stan's shoulder. He looked up and she said merely, "Thank you."

In short order, they were on the road. Stan expected that Jacob would take him to the bus station in Spokane, and when they reached the outskirts of the city, Stan anticipated Jacob pulling off from the highway anytime. He did not. Stan said nothing

when Jacob turned south, and he hoped Jacob would keep going. As the miles ticked by, it was like watching coins pour from a vintage gambling machine. He valued every mile traveling with trusted, friendly company.

Jacob looked over to Stan and finally said, "I'll take you wherever you want to go—I've got my luggage in the back. It's a surprise. Peter and I couldn't imagine letting you stray away alone. After all, the purpose of the colony is mutual support."

Stan was too moved to speak. He watched the golden wheat-covered hills roll by. He pulled out a map, and after a while they made a right turn. Jacob explained, "For the remainder of the drive we must take backroads. We'll avoid freeways, because the military often inspects traffic entering and leaving on the ramps. It's random, but dangerous."

Stan tried to enjoy the farmlands, the fresh breeze pouring in, and the landscapes. He looked wistfully at the patched-up opening in the dash where the radio had been. "I wish we had some music."

Jacob hung his elbow out of the open window and smiled. "Reach under the seat."

Stan leaned over, probed blindly, put his hand on a plastic box, and worked it out.

"Open it."

Inside was a forbidden radio and disk player.

"Turn it on."

Stan plugged in the power and worked the tuner, pausing at each station until he decided it was not what he wanted. Eventually he found a classical station, and the poignant music perfectly described the passing scenery and his moods. In a few hours they joined a road along the Columbia River. Mt. Hood appeared ahead in the southwest. Presently, they came to a place where the river cut into the eastern edge of the Cascades, where it was not possible to avoid the north-side highway, because of the steepness of the hills. As they approached a town, there was a military checkpoint ahead. Most of the cars and trucks were being waved through. Jacob estimated only about one in eight were being taken aside. This was a tense moment. Stan and Jacob agreed that they would not find a route around, so perhaps

they could make it through. To their relief, the guard waved them on with the other traffic in their group.

"Apparently, the government has mechanisms in place to monitor everyone's movements, but they're not using them," Jacob speculated. "After they bombed the Mollicoat Estate, they tightened up, but maybe they've relaxed since then."

Stan said nervously, "As soon as we can, let's leave the Columbia and wander the forest and country roads all the way to Vancouver. I can show you where to go."

Once they reached Stevenson, where they stopped for hamburgers and milkshakes, they turned north and did as Stan had suggested.

In time they left the deep forest behind and joined the Washougal River. Here the land was hilly and blanketed with woods and abandoned pastures. Stan needed a bladder break and Jacob pulled up a paved side road and parked at a wide space. While Jacob waited, Stan waded across a field covered in chest-high weeds toward a wide-branching oak on the upper end. There was a large mound of soil in one corner of the field. He could not see his feet through the weeds. Suddenly, the ground before him gave way and he slid. Before he knew it, he was sitting bewildered but unhurt in the bottom of a long trough that had been hidden under the plants. The trough was about six feet deep, a green light suffused the air, and it reeked of decaying flesh. To his horror, piled up on both sides of him, Stan saw slacks, moldy jackets, and muddy leather shoes—dress clothing—and inside of them human bodies—dozens of them, in unnatural, uncomfortable poses. Stan screamed, scrambled from the hole, and ran toward the truck. Jacob had heard the scream and met Stan at the edge of the field.

"What was it? What did you see?" Jacob demanded.

Stan fell to the ground and, trembling, described the macabre scene, and then added, "Hands, hair, and faces—gray, immobile faces. There were men, women, and children tossed together. What's happened?" he asked in despair.

"Are you okay?"

"No! How could I be?"

"I want to have a look. Wait here."

Jacob walked away and returned a few minutes later. He was controlled, but shaken. "They've all been shot. I thought maybe they had died from plague. I wonder why whoever murdered those people didn't fill in the trench. Something prevented them. There are other trenches. Let's . . ." He took a deep breath as if to clean his lungs from the foulness.

Then it was silent except for birds and the late-season insects.

"Let's go," Jacob said at last. "There's nothing we can do."

"I'll need to stop again soon."

As they drove, they wondered about what they had seen. They had no answers, except that humanity seemed to have failed at that place and upon a recent time—the kingdom of death had reigned there.

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It was emotionally hard for Stan to pass within a few miles of his parents' home, where he had grown up, but it would be too unsafe to stop, and besides, what would there be to see? Everyone was gone. They passed a few blocks from where he had lived as a bachelor and as a newly married, happy young man. Stan again felt the heartache of familiar pain.

The most hazardous part of the journey would likely be crossing the Columbia River—it was unavoidable if they wanted to see the Mollicoat Estate. They decided to attempt at the Interstate 5 bridge that crossed between Vancouver and Portland. At the onramp checkpoint, a guard inspected Jacob's license, peered into his face, and told them they were free to continue. He had not even glanced at Stan. Passing through the center of Portland, Stan gazed at the buildings of his old campus. There again in the east stood the familiar triangle of Mt. Hood, brilliantly white in the diminishing light, with a fall overcoating of snow. An hour after sunset, they reached a state park near where the Mollicoat Estate had been and tied a tarp under a fir tree. They stretched out in their sleeping bags with the deep fir needles as a mattress and fell unconscious, exhausted.

Early the next morning, they ate bread and peanut butter for breakfast and drove toward the Mollicoat Estate bluff. As they drew near, a new patch of sky dominated the horizon. The estate was gone—not only the buildings, but the entire hill, as if it had

been mined and hauled off, but the hill was not far away, because soil and rock displaced by the colossal explosions littered the landscape in peculiar patterns everywhere. Weeds and young pioneer trees grew on the new soil formations. Stan recalled a geology course he had taken as an elective science in college. The class partly consisted of selections of geologic vocabulary used for every kind of stone or ice formation known. The Palouse Hills near Pullman, which they had passed through earlier in the day, were made of "loess," a soil built up from centuries of wind. Scientists would have to invent a new word to describe soil deposits made from 40,000-pound bombs.

They had approached the estate from the west and drove past a guarded gate on the north side. Stan and Jacob kept driving and took roads that circled and came as near as possible to what had been estate land. A 10-foot fence topped with razor wire surrounded the entire property, but not the fence the Mollicoat Estate had built. Most of that one had been buried, or destroyed, and this fence was set a few hundred yards farther out, except where the old fence bordered a road. Here they stopped, and from this angle, Stan could see more clearly that the hill had been blown away, and he saw the inside wall of a shortened earthen cone, reminiscent of Mt. St. Helens.

After driving the circumference, they returned to the gate and parked at a distance. The gate area contained several new buildings, and behind them there was a taller building like a conning tower. Large box and dump trucks were entering and exiting, and pickups as well. The gatekeepers carried side-arms and wore uniforms. While Stan and Jacob watched, one of the truck drivers was ordered from the cab at gunpoint. Four or five soldiers trotted from the nearest building, and the driver put his hands up on the side of the truck's box. A soldier patted the driver down and then handcuffed his arms behind his back, and soldiers took him away. Another soldier brought a dog that began sniffing around the truck, and others opened up the back and peered inside. Stan said with quiet urgency, "Start driving. We shouldn't be seen here."

As they left, the reality of the situation struck Stan like a sledgehammer. He was dazed for a few seconds until indignation seethed from him. "It's a landfill! They're filling

the crater with garbage. They're burying the bodies of my family under garbage."

After the flush of anger passed, Stan said quietly, "Let's go back to Vancouver. There's only one person now who will know something, if he's still alive."

"Where?" Jacob asked.

"You'll see. Just follow my directions."

Police at checkpoints did not seem interested in Stan, the passenger, and he and Jacob sailed through two more without difficulty. This was not the case for everyone, because while they waited, they did see a few cars searched. When they neared the area of Stan's old neighborhood, a sudden thought came to him, and he asked Jacob to remain at the nearby strip mall while he would walk.

"I'm not going far. I don't want to implicate you more, my friend. Nor do I want to give the person I'm seeking more exposure. It might be a meaningless precaution, but maybe prudence is still valuable. Anyway, wait, will you? If you want, buy some groceries."

"I'm not worried, but I'm amenable to your caution."

Stan began walking and soon came to familiar sidewalks with the same cracks and faults that he remembered, and tree-filled yards with the same branches hanging down in his way. He passed the house he and Mindy lived in once, stopped, and looked back. A woman was painting a bookshelf on the front porch, a shelf that he had once used for his best books, and there were his hanging geranium baskets, the flowers brown and dead. The house had been given an update—vinyl siding and a new roof. Trees had been cut down—the large English walnut in the back. The woman on the porch lifted her head and noticed him. He began walking again, and being midmorning, it might have been a Sunday of his previous life on the way to church. In another 15 minutes he reached his destination. Fr. Schmidt's name still was on the carved sign in front of the church building. The door was locked. Stan rang the rectory doorbell. He waited. Rang it again. He heard the bell, but no sound of stirring from within. He banged on the door a few times then walked around to the back of the rectory and found a ground-floor bathroom window partially open. Stan glanced around and spotted a

wheelbarrow, and with its assistance as a stool he clambered through the window. Inside, the hall floor creaked, and as he pushed open the swinging door insulating the kitchen from the rest of the house, he heard furtive movement. The lights were out. In the corner, in a darkened shadow behind a counter, someone crouched.

Stan called out, "Fr. Schmidt? Is it you?"

The someone rose up, and he was pointing an old long-barrel revolver at Stan.

"Go away!" the person shouted. "You're putting me in danger. My whole congregation. If you don't leave, I'll call the police. Someone might have seen you."

Stan's heart beat furiously. His mouth was dry, but he managed to rasp, "Fr. Schmidt, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Schmidt said, angrily. "You're a wanted criminal."

"I know."

"Why did you come here? You're . . . you're, peril, perilous to your friends."

"I need to ask you something important. Fr. Schmidt, is it really *you*? Do you know where my children are? Please, put the gun down. Can we talk? I . . . I've got to find them."

The tension that had been building in Stan over the hours since he had left the colony—since he found the Mollicoat Estate turned into a dump—finally broke him. He had come expecting—hoping for—solace, and here was a gun in his face. His head swam and the room faded. His ears roared. He was fainting, and he bent down and sat on the floor. "I've got to find them." He felt sicker and lay down on his stomach. He was aware of movement around him, a pillow placed under his head, and a heavy, mothball-smelly blanket over him.

Fr. Schmidt flopped on the floor beside him. "Are you feeling better?" he asked in a chastened tone.

"Yes, thanks. That hasn't happened in years— Oh . . ." He remembered when he had passed out from being drunk.

"Stan, I'm sorry. You scared me. When I saw you at the door, I hoped you would leave, and then when you climbed into the window my fears got the better of me."

"It's okay. These days test us."

"Well, it is not okay. You must forgive me."

"Then I will."

There was some silence. Neither knew where to start. Stan was unsure of Schmidt's trustworthiness.

"Stan, I have things to tell you. But where have you been? How have you survived?"

"Fr. Schmidt, you know I shouldn't say. Suffice that I've been as well as could be expected, and I'm not going to hide anymore."

"You're not?"

"Depending on what you tell me."

"About your children?"

"Are they alive or dead?" Stan asked plainly.

"Alright. I'm sorry, I'm nervous. They're safe, I think. They were not killed in the bombing. They . . . I . . . let me tell you what I know. Let's move to my den. Can you get up?"

"I'm fine now. But I'll be better beyond hope if Maxwell and Chrysanthe are okay."

"I left them in the care of people who will protect them."

Aided by Fr. Schmidt, Stan stood awkwardly and walked back to a corkwood-paneled room, which, combined with the fireplace and the aroma of pipe tobacco that Fr. Schmidt kept but seldom smoked, gave the room a distinctive rich smell. Stan sat on a comfortable couch, and Fr. Schmidt handed him the blanket.

"Would you like something to drink?" Schmidt asked.

"Hot chocolate, please, if you have it, but I would rather talk."

"I don't have cow's milk," Schmidt said, not attending to Stan's preference for information. "But I'll put on water to heat. I'll make you my specialty with honey and cocoa powder, and coconut milk."

Fr. Schmidt trotted toward the kitchen. Stan listened to the mantel clock when it chimed, and he thought through what he might do next. He was incredibly relieved to hear that the children survived the bombing. He had waited for so long to hear definite news of them that he had the patience to wait longer to hear the whole story—a little patience. Maybe they were here in Vancouver in foster care; maybe they were a lure to catch him. Fr. Schmidt took so long that Stan wondered if the priest might have called the police and run away, but just then he came

in with a tray with the hot drinks and cold blueberry muffins, each topped with a slice of butter. Stan took up a mug and began munching a muffin while Schmidt began.

"You're looking well, Stan; you've lost weight since I saw you last. No?" Stan had vigorously shaken his head. Changing pace, Schmidt continued. "I'm sorry; small talk eases the painful, but it avoids the essential. When I saw you last, I told you about the Telford girl—her last moments. That was a long time ago. Your children are fine, as far as I know. I helped them escape for the initial stage of their journey. They weren't on the Mollicoat Estate when it was bombed, but were with your sister, who was working at the Sternes' Vancouver residence. No, I mean she had taken a break to go shopping with the children. They were all at a park playing when the bombs dropped."

Stan breathed a sigh and closed his eyes.

Schmidt searched and spoke his memory. "Sarah told me she had come over to help Mrs. Sterne pack small items into boxes. Dishes and so on. The Sternes planned to move the family permanently to the estate and then rent out the house. By the way, Sarah told me the renters were Assembly members. The Sterne family had decided to move to save money and because the neighborhood was no longer safe for children to play in, even in their own yard. It never was, sandwiched between the river and the interstate. You probably knew this already," Schmidt said, interrupting himself.

Stan nodded *yes*, but gestured to him impatiently and said, "Go ahead, *please*."

"Apparently, the destruction of the Assembly compound in Oregon triggered a computer. The computer simultaneously called me and a few other Assembly members. All I knew from the warning was something really bad had happened, and the message meant I was to invoke my personal evacuation plan—my PEP, you know. I felt the explosion here, but I made no connection with the alarm at first. It felt like an earthquake, Stan. Everyone was saying it was an earthquake, until the GiP-authorized lie said the tremor was produced by the impact of a giant meteor on an unpopulated hill. I had no reason to think that my involvement in the Assembly was known to anyone outside a tiny circle, and I decided not to run, but I wanted to be

sure everyone at the Sterne residence had means of escape. And so I drove there immediately. Their house was on fire. I could see it from a distance burning so huge that there wasn't any chance of stopping the flames, and I still don't know if the Assembly ignited the fire to destroy records, or if it was the GiP.

"When I returned here, I was surprised that Sarah and her children, and yours, were waiting on the doorstep. And there were two other children. She begged me to take her to the Oregon coast. She said she needed to leave their family vehicle behind. I agreed to take them in the church van, and we abandoned the car along the interstate. We drove down to Newport Bay. One of the children, the oldest, a Sterne boy of about 15 years old, ran away when we stopped to pick up some things at a store. We searched for him for nearly an hour, but that was the most we could spare. Sarah and the rest of the children boarded a small fishing boat docked at a pier, and I returned home. That's all I know . . . They had invited me to come with them and said they were going to another country, somewhere safe. I said, 'No, thank you. I have work here, and I might serve some purpose.' That reminds me. Sarah gave me a letter for you, and I've kept it hidden."

"The older boy ran away and did not board the boat?"

"Yes." Schmidt stood and stepped toward the fireplace. "That was quite troubling. We had to leave him. Would you like the letter now? It might explain things better than I have."

"Yes. No. I can wait. What happened next?"

"Ah . . . the Assembly became silent. I suppose that the directors are all dead. Your parents and in-laws, including your wife's older brothers—not the young ones—also are dead. Maybe some escaped, but if they did, I know nothing about it. The only hope I have of the Assembly's survival is that there were fewer arrests than I expected. And fewer inexplicable replacements within the GiP, meaning that those of us inside haven't been discovered, unless they have been quietly put away. But I fear that the Assembly is effectively decapitated," Schmidt concluded gravely. "Yes. It's dead."

Stan was sobered by the priest's confirmation of the deaths of his parents and other family members, and yet assured beyond his most optimistic dreams by the news about his children and

Sarah. Her and Bennett's evacuation plan was identical to his, except for the port of departure. The PEP was never to be discussed, except at the moment of desperation to coordinate with other survivors. If Sarah reached the fishing boat, then the most hazardous part had been overcome—but why, why, did Luther run away? They would set out onto the ocean at about 4:00 a.m. to fish for salmon—they really would be fishing—and be picked up by a Coast Guard cutter within six to eight hours and transported to a submarine rendezvous, and then by various means on to . . . a country unsuspected by the GiP, unknown even to those escaping until they arrived. He did not tell any of this to Fr. Schmidt.

The priest was watching him. Stan leaned forward on the couch, closed his eyes again, and massaged his neck with his hand.

"What are you going to do?" Schmidt asked.

"I'm not sure. But I have an idea."

"Go back to where you were!" Schmidt said emphatically. "There is nothing you *can* do. The GiP is rounding up dissidents and they're disappearing. There are trials all the time, and bombings and sniper attacks against the government. Go back and hide!"

Stan winced. "Maybe I should leave the country." He was thinking of how he might try to follow where he guessed Sarah and the children were.

"It's impossible."

"Why?"

"Well, the borders and ports are all heavily guarded. You might hike out through Canada, though it is less safe than the U.S. But, Stan, do you know that you're a hunted man?"

"Of course."

"Do you know how much hunted?"

"No, no. Does it really matter?"

"You're on the top 10 list of the FBI."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm not. There's an $8 million reward for your capture."

"Why, I wonder?" Stan exclaimed, awestruck.

"You'd have to read the allegations. I did once, but I'm afraid to make another computer connection to the FBI site. You're

charged with . . . terrorism, sedition, treason, murder, robbery, and fraud. That's why I was nervous when you arrived."

"I wonder why they dumped in a murder charge. Did you—" Stan stopped. It was difficult for Stan to ask this. "Did you see Mindy's . . . did you see the execution on television?"

"No, Stan, but I heard about it from parishioners. They were angry with the government at first, but after they ingested the GiP propaganda, it pacified them. One reason the GiP wants you so much is you may be one of the few known links to the Assembly who's yet alive. They were so afraid of the Assembly when they discovered it that they didn't take time to carefully investigate and infiltrate. They panicked and bombed the hell out of it, but that left them in the dark. If they can find you and get information you have, it may help them unravel the Assembly that's active underground, or embedded in the GiP."

"But I don't know anything."

"Really?"

Stan thought for a moment. What he knew were guesses and half facts. Yes, he had always been outside looking inside, a worm looking up, but his experiences and what little he knew could be manufactured into important threads which could lead to certainties, which would lead to the arrests of people in high places. If the GiP wanted him so badly, it might mean they knew less about the Assembly than he believed. But on the other hand, would he have to volunteer before he told them anything? Couldn't they force him to talk? They could torture him. They *would* torture him. In any case, he knew little for sure about the Assembly, probably less than the GiP. But then this reason for wanting him was speculation on Fr. Schmidt's part. It did no good to base his actions on speculation when he had immutable realities. He was not a pugilist; he was not a conspirator; he was not a politician; he was not an assassin; he certainly was not a criminal, as the GiP believed; he was a father and a human being, a plain person, and the path ahead seemed simple.

Seeing Stan's deliberation, Fr. Schmidt asked the obvious pastoral question. "How've you been coping?"

"I'm all right. Grief creeps up when my guard is down, but usually I'm all right. I miss Mindy, of course, and my parents—I've hardly had room to mourn for them, but I have, somehow—

and I miss them all. The hurting never leaves. I'm okay. I realize that this world is not my home." Stan did not want to talk more about Mindy.

"Good. That's good. Stan, I performed a memorial service."

"You did? Here at the church?"

"At the Mollicoat Estate, or where it had been."

"Inside, in the crater?"

"No, but near the fence on the southwest side, by the lake. After the bombing, the road was covered with earth, but they cleared and opened it. I wore my vestments and went alone, and used the Burial of the Dead service from the prayer book."

"Thank you. I wish I could have been there."

"You're welcome."

"Fr. Schmidt, on the way here we found a trench full of human bodies, unburied. Have you heard about anything like this?"

"No. Are you sure?"

Stan wondered at Schmidt's ignorance about this and decided that further inquiry would be unfruitful. "Fr. Schmidt, do . . . do you have a telephone book?"

Fr. Schmidt went to the kitchen and brought back the book and a phone.

"I only need the book, thanks. And will you get me Sarah's letter now?"

Stan fluttered through the yellow pages, and as he did, Fr. Schmidt took a large Bible from the mantelpiece and removed from it a sealed, smudged, white envelope. Stan found what he was looking for, sighed deeply, and gave the phone book back.

"Let me tell you what I've decided," he said. "As my pastor, you should know, and I want you to pray for me."

"Here's your sister's letter. I didn't open it, but I kept it near the fireplace to burn, in case the rectory was raided."

Stan held the envelope and wondered if he should open it now or wait until later. He desperately wanted to hear more about the children, and it might make a difference to his future course. He had already made up his mind what he *should* do, but he was afraid. The seal of the letter was intact. He opened the envelope and began reading Sarah's script quickly and silently. He skimmed through to confirm what Fr. Schmidt had said, and was overjoyed to read that the youngest Sterne child had been with

Sarah. Seeing that there was nothing requiring secrecy, he read it aloud from the beginning.

> Dear Stan,
>
> I am writing as we are driving to the beach. With me are Kiyohira, Mutsumi, and Guthrie, and your Maxwell and Chrysanthe, and Luther and Mallory. Seven children, all my responsibility. They are listening to a story recording right now. They are all fine and brave. Maxwell said he is looking forward to the boat ride. When things happened here, we had to leave in a hurry. Because I know he was at home, I am certain my beloved Bennett is gone, as are many we have known, and our friends. Mom and Dad are gone, too, because they were at their apartment in the morning. I had just spoken with Mom on the phone before I left to go shopping and to the park. She had planned with Dad to plant some new tulips and daffodils today in a bed on campus for next spring.
>
> There is no time to grieve. That will have to wait until we can rest and let down. We will be traveling for two weeks or longer until we reach our destination. I know that I should be sorrowful, but it has not reached me yet. My mind cannot grasp what has happened. I felt the explosion through the ground and saw the huge smoke plume rising in the southwest and thought *not a good direction,* but it did not occur to me that it actually could be what it was. The evacuation message (a total stranger walked up and handed me a note) confirmed a disaster. Later on, Murray Schmidt told me his guess. I suppose he told you that when we received the warning, I started back to the Sternes' Columbia River house right away, but I felt afraid and stopped and turned back before I got there. I remembered our evacuation training, which emphasized we should run immediately to the designated place. It is just as well, because Murray said the house was burning. I tried to call you, but my phone had stopped working.

I am doing my best to remain calm for the children and so I can make good decisions. It is not hard, and I am able to focus on each little problem as it arises. Those problems have been ordinary so far—tying shoes and feeding the children . . . and answering their questions. Luther has been saying that he wants to stay and join his brother Bernard, who is caving somewhere, or if he cannot find him, to fight against those who hurt us. He wants to be a man, but this would be foolish, and I told him that he could not leave us. We do not have any extra clothes, but Murray knows a secondhand store on the coast that we can run into for a few minutes. We have ample food. I trust the people who will be helping us, and if something goes wrong, I'll take it as it comes. I am carried on the wings of eagles.

Whatever happens, Stan, do not worry. I am afraid, but fear is only the surface of my emotions. Deep inside, I am confident. It will be hardest for you, my brother, because you might be alone. I have good company, and hope you, too, will find people you can trust and who will help you. We have lost so much, but much remains to live for. I will take care of your dear children as if they were my own, and I will give my life for them, if necessary. They are out of your hands, so you should not worry. Maybe someday we will see each other again. I will try mailing you a postcard at Murray's address after we are settled, if it seems wise. Thank you, Stan, for all your support and love. May the Lord protect and bless you, and give you strength. I will pray for you every day.

Love, Sarah

p.s. I would like to write more, but we are now outside the thrift store. I am scribbling fast so I hope you can read this. Don't do anything your children will be ashamed of, Stan. It is important what happens to you. You are their father, and someday they will want to know how

> you lived and, if it is God's will, how you died—that you lived and died fighting for what is right. Don't *ever* give up hope. There is one thing more. I said I have seven children in my care, but there are eight, because I learned a week ago that I am with child. Bennett and I have been trying ever since we were married. Now he is gone, but we have this small life we made together. It seems I am destined to not have a normal family, but I will hold up. If it is a boy, I will name him Stanley Bennett Uchida. If a girl, after your wonderful wife, Mindy. She was my best friend, and I miss her terribly. Thinking about Guthrie… Until today, how he came to be was the worst thing that ever happened to me, but he is the best blessing that I could ever have. The best from the worst. Someday we may see the murder of my husband, our parents, and friends in this light. The world means it for evil, but God intends it for good.
>
> p.p.s. Oh, Stan, we have been frantic! Luther waited in the van while we all went into the thrift store, and when we came back out, he was gone! He left a note saying that we shouldn't worry, because he is in God's hands. We drove around looking for him as long as we could, but we had to leave him behind. It's almost more than I can bear.

Stan had read this with difficulty because his voice kept failing, and he could not see well because of moisture in his eyes. But when he finished, he looked to Fr. Schmidt and asked, "Did you get a postcard?"

Schmidt shook his head and said, "Not that I remember. But I wouldn't take it to mean she didn't safely reach her destination. I receive very little mail these days. None international. There's one thing I can tell you, Stan. The men I saw at the fishing boat—there were three . . . I didn't linger, but these men, from

what I saw, they were courteous to your sister and full of care for the children. And, if this means anything, they were not men to squabble with. I felt an implicit trust in their competence to protect your loved ones."

"Special Forces," Stan said inaudibly.

"What?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Nothing." Stan also felt reassured by Schmidt's description of the men.

"There's something else. I just remembered." Schmidt pulled another envelope from his Bible. "Photographs. When the Mollicoat Estate was bombed, Sarah's van contained a box of Sterne family photo albums. I sent it all but these away for safe keeping—what I didn't incinerate."

Stan's heart fluttered when he saw the image of Mindy as a young girl brushing a horse. There were a half-dozen pictures. Stan could not dwell on them now.

"Well," Fr. Schmidt said, as he resumed his seat, "you started telling me your plans. Is this a good idea? Do I need to know?"

"No, except for my sake, but secrecy about me doesn't matter now. Not anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"The letter, if anything, encourages me to carry out what I've decided. I'm going to continue the battle that my father-in-law, my friends, and my wife fought, but I'm going to do it a way they never tried . . . a way they *should* have tried. Likely, it's hopeless, and I might not live, but it will be what's essential."

All of a sudden, it occurred to Stan that if he told Fr. Schmidt, it might jeopardize his mission, because he was not positive the priest would not turn him in for the reward money. He had at first dismissed this concern because he had resigned himself to capture, but not captured too early, before he had accomplished his purpose. There was nothing in Schmidt's manner suggesting he might be treacherous, except for his nervousness, which had not completely dissipated. *Was* Schmidt trustworthy? He had saved Sarah and the children, but what if he had changed since then? Eight million dollars could be a temptation beyond his ability to bear. Stan searched for a solution to this dilemma, for a test for Schmidt's loyalty. There wasn't any, unless . . . Fr. Schmidt wouldn't have told him about the reward if he planned

to betray him, unless he did so to put him off guard. If Schmidt planned to turn him in, wouldn't he have called the police right away when he, Stan, had passed out on the floor? Not necessarily, because in the confusion maybe Schmidt had not immediately thought of betraying him.

There was nothing Stan could do about this except to trust Fr. Schmidt, or leave. He decided to leave as the test.

"I . . . I have to take care of something I just thought of. It's extremely important, and I have to go right away. But I might come back later this evening. Can, can I stay the night here?" Stan said, conveying only half the truth.

Fr. Schmidt was a kindly man, but he did not always seem to be perceptive, and he said only, "Why, sure. Are you hungry? I'll fix food for you before you leave. I'm famished myself. We usually eat an early supper, and my wife is late coming home. I'll open a tin of stew or we have a leftover chicken casserole in the fridge. I'll heat it up."

Stan was still hungry, even after the muffins, but he stood up and said, "No, thank you."

Action toward leaving set him on another trail of uncertainty. If he left, what would prevent Fr. Schmidt from calling the police immediately? They would swarm the area within minutes. He would never reach Jacob. There were dangers on every hand, and in the end, Stan changed to his first plan, to trust his present direction and what he knew to be true, rather than running. Was this not what he came to do, finally?

Stan settled back onto the couch. He was weary. This oscillation was tiring. "Fr. Schmidt, I have to tell you. The reason I almost left is . . . I don't entirely believe in you. No, that's not what I meant. I think, or thought, you might report me to the authorities."

Fr. Schmidt did not speak, but bowed his head. Then he cleared his throat and said, "I have a confession for you, Stan, also. I wouldn't do it, not to save my own life. But I'd be lying if I told you I haven't been tempted. It's not exactly a temptation, but the money has been bearing down on me since you arrived. I've been praying and forcing it away. When I went to the kitchen for refreshments? I was stalling so I could

think. That's when the temptation was strongest. It will quit presently, and because this is in the open, quite presently."

Stan was not surprised. "What about your wife?"

Fr. Schmidt deliberated a few seconds. "Her personality is so far from going to the authorities, she'd be hurt for the question to be asked, but there's no need to complicate this further. We will avoid the issue. She doesn't know of the Assembly and of my scanty connections. She's a wonderful wife, but she doesn't follow details of the news. For once, I'm glad."

"She won't know I'm wanted?"

"I don't think so. But even if she does, she'll want to minister to you first. Her way would be to ask you to turn yourself in voluntarily."

"Oh. Well, then there's no problem. Because—"

"What do you mean?" Schmidt said sharply, despite himself.

Once Stan had taken this further step of resignation, he felt that opening up to Fr. Schmidt was the only thing he could have done. Furthermore, he decided to entrust Fr. Schmidt with the knowledge of his months with the Hutterites, and retrieve Jacob if he were willing, so that both of them could spend the night. No, wait a second. What if the GiP authorities wanted to know who had been helping him? They would surely know who his former pastor was and want to interview him. Best to listen first.

"Let me ask a question," Stan said. "Did the police or the FBI talk to you about me after the bombing of the Mollicoat Estate?"

"Yes."

"What did you tell them?"

"They wanted to know everything. I told them of our relationship as pastor and parishioner. I pretended you had some private sins you had confessed to me, and I said this was privileged information."

"Then what?"

"They kept pressing and making ambiguous threats, and I said repeatedly this was confidential business, and they left. In two days without warning they returned and seized our computers, 'to secure your membership list,' they said. A delivery truck returned the computers a few weeks later. The hard drives had been erased."

"That was it?"

"They interviewed half the parish."

"Did they ever come back to you again?"

"No, but up until a few months ago, I felt that I was being watched. I couldn't say that I saw anybody or my phone was tapped, but I just had this feeling."

"So it's possible I've been noticed."

"It's possible."

Stan wished he had parted from Jacob prior to coming to Vancouver, but it was necessary to walk back to the mall and tell him to leave now. He asked Fr. Schmidt if he would remain at home until he returned, and after the priest agreed and said he would start supper, Stan set out swiftly. The walk went fast. Jacob was sitting in the pickup, watching people. Stan got in the passenger side. "Did you get some food?" he asked.

"Bread and cheese, carrots, fig bars, donuts—things that don't require cooking. It's in the back."

"Good, good," Stan said absently. "I found who I was looking for, and I'm ready for what's next. There's one other thing I want you to do for me, and then we should say farewell."

"Why so soon?"

"My acquaintance here should not meet you. It's for your protection."

"Why? Is he dangerous?"

"Maybe, but probably not. It's more that he may be watched."

"But if he's a danger, what about for you?"

"I'm almost beyond danger."

"You're too enigmatic. Tell me what you mean!"

"You might talk me out of it."

"Stan, now you've got to tell me. Besides, where will I sleep tonight? It's getting late. You explain who this person is and what the risk is for me, and let me decide if I should stay. Whatever you're planning, you shouldn't be alone."

Stan yielded and began describing Fr. Schmidt and what had happened with him. Partway through, he asked Jacob to drive north and west. Stan kept talking, and as he did so he darted his gaze from side to side, looking up the various streets. They circled around the neighborhood of Ponder's abortion place, not going too close, because gates manned by armed guards blocked every road approaching the building.

Jacob observed, "I wonder what's inside the barricades."

Stan recalled with a stab of pain how years ago he and Mindy had come this way on their first "date." Stan did not bother inspecting all the access points and instructed Jacob to return toward the church. He said, "If I'm apprehended, Fr. Schmidt will be questioned. I don't know if he'd be able to conceal the fact that you knew and helped me."

"But I'm still going along with you. At least until you explain what you have in mind. Introduce me as Karl, and never refer to Hutterites or personal information about me."

They parked a few blocks away from the rectory and carried their packs and bags. Fr. Schmidt welcomed them and did not seem surprised that Stan had brought someone. He showed interest momentarily in the newcomer, but wisely asked no questions except about Jacob's health and general condition, the same as he might inquire of a close friend who had been absent for some time. Mrs. Schmidt had arrived and greeted Stan and Jacob equally, since she had not known Stan. The table was already set with china, silver, and wineglasses. She made another place for Jacob. The men took quick showers and changed into their fresh sets of clothing. Fr. and Mrs. Schmidt brought in the dishes of hot food. After thanks was given, they began eating, and the minimal conversation reminded Stan of a Hutterite meal. Mrs. Schmidt spoke about orphans in a certain African country, and silence resumed.

All four of them were thinking about different subjects, and there seemed to be too much to be said, or nothing safe to say. Stan wondered why Mrs. Schmidt did not show any curiosity about her guests. The food was delicious: marinated pork loin, cinnamon applesauce, green beans, and oven-baked potatoes. There was no bread. Small talk seemed out of place, except that when Fr. Schmidt had finished his plate, he filled the quiet with short narrations of families in the church, stories of their struggles and losses, defeats and fights, separations, worldly successes, and the victories, pitiful compared to all else. Stan yearned to escape from these sad tales and retreat tonight back to the colony and never leave, but he believed that he knew why society had come to such a sorry condition.

Mrs. Schmidt brought in banana pudding for dessert and excused herself to go to a meeting, and when they were finished eating, the men put away the leftovers, loaded the dishwasher, made tea, and retired to the den. Fr. Schmidt began building a fire in the fireplace. Jacob was sitting back in his chair. Stan sat uncomfortably on the edge of the couch.

Fr. Schmidt lit a match to newspaper under the kindling and took his accustomed seat. "Well, Stan, what does the future hold for you?" he asked somberly, almost fearfully.

"I was wondering why your wife was so silent at the meal."

"I told her that you and Karl had come here asking for money. She was angry. Didn't you ask for money?"

"Oh," Stan said.

He sat back, closed his eyes, and began speaking well-considered lines of reasoning. "I'll put this to you as plainly as I can. It doesn't require lengthy argument or exposition. That I must say it only shows how depraved we are, and how compromised everyone is. We are living under a cloud of moral confusion—it's a chosen blindness, but on the other hand we are subjected to it, because it's environmental: a secret contract—a covenant—that we subscribe to as members of this culture. Okay. The truth is, abortion kills children. You . . . Karl, and you, Fr. Schmidt, and I, Stanley Timmons, pretend it's not happening. Or we pretend that we can't stop it. And the reason is, we are afraid to stop it, afraid of the consequences to us personally. A few years ago the consequences were not so overwhelming, but now stopping it is impossible, and it becomes more impossible each day. The cost—the price of our safety and wellbeing—is that we are incapable of caring about it any longer. We let it go on for so long when it was in our power to stop it, that we became paralyzed. Now, when the so-called government protects these hellholes with the military, our will and courage are nonexistent. And you can see life rotting all around. It's bad enough that we slaughter these children, but the slaughter has spread in a multitude of forms and infects everything. Everything."

Stan stood up from the couch and faced the fireplace, resting his hands on the mantel and studying down into the flames. His voice sounded firm and strong, but not angry.

"That's my analysis, and here's my solution. It doesn't involve strategy, or organization, or money, or fundraising, or political victory, or overwhelming force. It doesn't require a refined spirituality or a perfect doctrine, or a special vocation, but only the simplest human reaction anyone can offer. I'm not talking about rebuilding or reforming society, but only a solution for my personal integrity. And if everyone welcomes this solution into his heart, and if every person acts in the simplest way possible consistent with the reality, then, well, then society can be saved. Families can be healed. This nation and civilization can begin a process of recovery. The solution is relatively easy, but the alternative is a violent internal war and other severe afflictions, because the nature of the world is this: Reality can't be thwarted, and there's a moral order that will assert itself, no matter what perversity battles against it, whatever decay rots our souls. The Lord will turn our hearts, either by the cross or by the sword, and if neither, we will be crushed and thrown into utter darkness."

He turned now and sank onto the stone hearth with his back to the fire and hugged his knees. In the next words, his voice began small and faint, but grew louder and stronger.

"I came here to find my children, or to discover where they might be and join them. But they're out of my ability to help, and they're safe, I hope; one way or another, they're safe. I've done what I can. But I know there are children who'll be killed tomorrow at 1008 Fremont Street in Vancouver, by a person with a government-issued permit to kill—a medical license—and the children will be given over to death by a parent, or two parents, maybe a grandparent. We are commanded by Christ to love our neighbors as ourselves. If my two children, Maxwell and Chrysanthe, were being taken to that damned building tomorrow, don't you think I'd go there and try to stop it? Even if it costs me my life! Yes, and if I could not stop their execution, I'd be there to pray and just . . . just be there, to be as close to them as I could!"

Stan could no longer speak and buried his face in his hands where he sat in front of the fire. In a few moments he had calmed himself, and now he was somber and resolute.

"I'm probably being stupid. I'm losing my mind, but this is what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves—to love our neighbor's children as we love our own, and that's what I plan to do tomorrow and every day for as long as I'm able. Even if I'm the only one, and even if it's useless. I should have done it years ago. The killing place is open in the morning. They probably will arrest me."

Struck by mortal fear, Fr. Schmidt, who had been holding himself back until now, exclaimed bitterly, "I wish you'd told me this earlier! I wish you'd never come here!"

"Excuse me, sir, is Stan right or wrong?" Jacob as "Karl" was ready to battle for Stan.

"He's right, damn it, but it's too inopportune to be right. He'll be arrested and the authorities will bother me endlessly about it. I'll be lucky if they don't arrest me for giving him shelter." He turned in his seat to face Stan. "Is this really necessary? Why can't we pray and trust—"

"I'm sorry, but I'm exhausted," Stan said, interrupting. "Where can I sleep? I could curl up . . . right here."

Fr. Schmidt grunted in frustration, jumped up, and, helping him with his luggage, showed Stan to an upstairs bedroom, one that had belonged to the Schmidt daughter. Fr. Schmidt said nothing further to Stan, but trotted back down the stairs. Stan brushed his teeth, opened a window, and climbed under the covers. He took the photos of Mindy and studied them a long while, his heart aching and his eyes absorbing every detail and nuance of that world long gone, and he listened to the arguing voices in the room below until he drifted into dreamless sleep.

In the middle of the night he awoke. He silently climbed from bed, sat at the window, and pulled back the curtains. Leaves rustled in the trees. Overhead, Stan could see portions of the sky and its fixed stars. When he had gone to bed, he had not been one hundred percent sure that he should go to the abortion place. His mind was convinced, but feelings argued against his mind, mitigating his resolve; and his resolve was weak. Fresh from sleep, Stan could think this through one last time. When he left the colony he knew that fear and the desire for comfort would overtake him when he drew near to his submission. Peter had said to him that he had lost everything and this freed him for this

undertaking, but it was not entirely true, because he had attachments: Lydia and the fragile security of the colony. But help for his resolution came unexpectedly. In returning to where he had lived almost all of his life, already his life with the Hutterites was fading. Especially after seeing the destruction of the Mollicoat Estate and thinking about his family, the colony had now become like a dream, and Lydia a girl in a dream. He was attracted to her, but his emotions had been deadened by losing so many people in whom he had invested emotion, and it had been easy to leave her. Yes, Jacob was a reminder, but Jacob seemed different than how Stan had known him on the colony. Even in the limited interactions he had seen since they had left, Jacob was now more like the exceptional, self-confident fighter pilot—a trained 21st-century warrior—than he was a member of a charming, humble sect of remarkable longevity. Jacob's attitude and bearing helped Stan keep his commitment by reducing the pull to return to the colony. Jacob was a singular warrior, and Stan realized that he himself was one, too. His wife, Mindy, had become a warrior and died. Stan was the only known adult male survivor of his clan, and he must continue its struggle in the only way left to him, the only way he knew, even if it was jumping off a cliff. He returned to his bed and pulled up the covers. He lay on the bed with his eyes open, thinking of war, and before he knew it he had fallen back asleep.

He awakened before dawn and dressed. At a small desk illumined by a lamp, he wrote a letter to his children for Fr. Schmidt to keep in the mantelpiece Bible. He wrote another letter for Jacob to give to Lydia, confirming his love for her and giving thoughts about what he had seen since he left the colony. And he prayed. Downstairs everyone else was sleeping. He made a breakfast of cereal, milk, and fruit and picked through his pack for what he might be allowed to keep if he was arrested. He found two plastic soda bottles in the Schmidts' recycling bin and filled them with water from the tap. Fr. Schmidt got up, and later Mrs. Schmidt, who began cooking a modest farm-style breakfast while Stan wrote a second letter to Lydia. Jacob was last to wake. Stan joined them at the table and ate a few sausages and a scrambled egg to supplement his early meal. Mrs. Schmidt left for a morning Bible study, thereby releasing

the men to discuss freely again. But there wasn't much more to be said. Apparently, Jacob and Fr. Schmidt had come to a draw.

"I'll walk to the abortion site," Stan announced. "It's eight miles, probably less, and it will help me relax and prepare for what might be ahead." Jacob and Fr. Schmidt both offered to drive him, but he refused. Stan said to Fr. Schmidt, "I'll call you on a telephone if I need a ride later today—back to here."

They said farewells outdoors on the sidewalk. Stan gave Jacob what belongings he would not be taking, including his wedding ring on the cord, which he removed from around his neck. "I don't want it lost," he said. Jacob put the duffel in the back of his truck. He too was leaving, for home—the Spokane colony.

Stan gave the photographs of Mindy, and Sarah's letter, to Fr. Schmidt. "Keep them for me, or archive them. You know what I mean."

Fr. Schmidt could not resist a final appeal, and he grasped Stan by the shoulder behind his back. "I've reached a peace about having the FBI visit me again. I'll do that, and gladly. Last night your friend Karl showed me the charity, the necessity, of this. But I have one more idea to offer you, Stan, and I must say this in my duty as a priest. Everything you believe is likely to be true. Yours is a tightly drawn, consistent ethical position carrying a strong element of veracity. But think of your children. What kind of father will you be to throw your life away needlessly? Surely, the world will change and you can be rejoined with them, and they'll need you."

Stan did not have the heart to enter into this argument again. Indeed, he had been fighting this contest in himself, and if he began once more, he might lose. He thought to say that his children were loved and provided for, but the others were hated and to be aborted, but he said nothing.

Jacob came to his assistance again, saying, "What kind of father would he be if he didn't recognize the humanity of the murdered children—to make the smallest appeal. How could children respect a *father* who overlooks so monstrous an evil?"

Fr. Schmidt took the meaning as it was intended, not only applicable to Stan, but to *him*, Father Schmidt. He bowed his head, and said, "Good question. Well then, let me bless you, Stanley," and Fr. Schmidt took a small vial from his pocket, put

his left hand on Stan's head, and making the sign of the cross on Stan's forehead with his oil-dabbed thumb, he said words of encouragement. After he had said "Amen," Fr. Schmidt asked, "Do you have a prayer book, Stanley?"

"No, I do not!" Stan replied, rushing the words from his throat that was pinched by sudden joy and tears, boosted by his anxiety.

"Here then, take mine," Schmidt said and pulled a book out from under his arm. "The 1928 version, a birthday present from a crotchety parishioner. My 65th birthday was this past weekend, you know. This will last you longer than any other I have."

Stan received the leather-bound, gilt-edged volume that smelled strongly of perfume; he gave Jacob and Fr. Schmidt hugs in turn, walked backwards a few steps, waved, said "goodbye," spun around, and kept walking. He thought that what he was about to do he should have done years ago, and the only way to go forward was to go back—to what he should have done when he first learned of this place of horror.

He had progressed less than a mile when a small pickup truck pulled up beside him. It was Jacob. "Get in," Jacob said. "I have to talk with you."

Stan was distressed at having been jerked back into the life he had just released, but he climbed into the cab. Jacob drove a block, turned into a parking lot of the community college, and found a shady space well away from other cars. Stan said nothing, but waited expectantly for Jacob to speak. He knew what Jacob was thinking.

"I'm going with you," Jacob said firmly.

"No," Stan said more firmly. "I can't handle this. It's enough for me to risk my life, but I can't do this if I'm worried about anyone else."

"That's a selfish attitude."

"You're right. But think, because of your military service, the GiP knows you and will connect you with the colony. You would be exposing all of them—Lydia and Julianne, and everyone. Maybe if things weren't so bad . . . I'm qualified for this job . . . and you're . . . not, but I have to believe that the people I love are safe."

Jacob was silent for a long while, and then he dropped his head slightly and exhaled softly from his nose—a self-critical acknowledgment that Stan was right. "I had to try," he said.

"I know," Stan said quietly. "But there's something else for you to do. You're my air support. I need you outside."

"Well, let me drop you off where you're going."

"No, I need to walk. It's not that far."

Jacob tried to smile, but it was more of a frown. He reached across and clasped Stan's hand. Another goodbye would have seemed redundant, so after Stan got out, Jacob simply drove away. Stan walked uphill to a building on the campus and sat on an outside bench for awhile, trying to regain the composure and detachment he had when he left the church rectory. This did not take long, and he stood up and resumed walking.

Stan walked until walking was the normal state of body and mind. His sweat dried, except under his backpack, and he thought through the mental battles again, but victory was nearly complete—or defeat, depending on whether he was a hero or fool. Tension melted away in the pleasure of exertion and the smooth function of his muscles. He kept walking.

Only when he paused for traffic at a busy intersection did he begin to feel weary. He took a deep drink from a water bottle. Looking down, he saw a round object in the gravel, and he bent to pick it up. A marble. For an instant he felt like the young boy he once was, a boy who had collected marbles and played them with his dad. Marbles were as precious as diamonds and rubies in those days, and the swirls and patterns ignited his imagination to fantasies of stupendous wealth. But this marble was chipped and plain. He put it in his pocket and continued walking, refreshed and amazed at how memories could flash back so realistically, triggered by some tiny thing, like a smell, complete with the precise, unique feelings he had had so many years before. His mind was clear, and presently he neared the neighborhood of the abortion place. There were people moving along the sidewalk and cars passing by, going about their regular business—heedless of the death camp close by.

Stan moved slowly toward a barricade as his rational self was flooded with abrupt, overwhelming fear. His clarity altered, and his eyes perceived a vision of descending, shimmering water—a

waterfall. Surely, the water would push him under the deep, where he would choke and drown, screaming into his ears in the bubbling cauldron. His body would bob and sink and rush into the gully below, sliding over the next fall. The moment passed. It was silly that he thought of the movie *War of the Worlds*, the 1953 version. He recalled the priest walking up to the humming eye on its glittering stalk. What did the priest say? "The Lord is my shepherd. Yea, though I walk through the valley of death, I shall fear no evil."

He prayed this, letting the words wash over him, trying to remember and say the rest of the psalm. He recalled imperfectly, but the more he worked at it the more complete it became. He kept walking toward the barricade. He pictured his own children being threatened with death just ahead of him. He had little to lose, and who knew what he might gain?

Soldiers saw him coming and moved cautiously to intercept him at the point where he aimed. "Excuse me, sir," one said, "but please tell us your business in this area. This is restricted." Stan reached the barricade, stopped walking, and did not answer, but bowed his head and faced the ground. His eyes were closed and full of tears. Even if he had opened them, the killing place was behind trees, shrubbery, and another building. Sight did not matter, because he could *feel* the looming horror of the killing site half a block away. With his eyes shut, he knew where it was and its exact shape. He could reach out and point to it. He could feel the stones of its foundation. He remembered the photograph of the aborted baby that fell out of an envelope during his first year teaching school. Now another picture came. Somewhere, maybe this exact second, someone not far away pointed a rifle at his head and watched him through the scope. He again prayed verses of the psalm.

"If you have no business here, you will leave immediately. Inside the perimeter is a restricted area." This soldier's harsh voice was female.

Stan knelt down on the pavement, and another soldier approached, his footsteps percussive, his tactical gear clunking into one of the steel barricades. This one called on his radio. There was an "incident in progress," he reported. Stan did not look up, but continued to pray. He no longer felt an irrational,

gripping fear, but he felt sick and out of control, like when a person begins the countdown for anesthesia, or perhaps, though few people have reported on this, before one dies. His prayer changed now. "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Then another vision raced to him. A scene from a movie or play. Shakespeare's *Richard III*. He taught that play once, didn't he? A beautiful woman keeping vigil, a queen, hanging her hands on a metal gate of a prison.

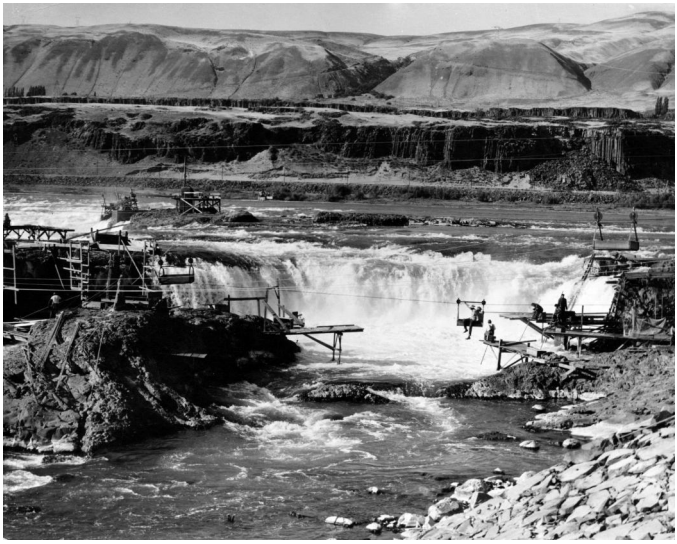
> Pity, you ancient stones, those tender babes
> Whom envy hath immured within your walls,
> Rough cradle for such little pretty ones!
> Rude ragged nurse, old sullen playfellow
> For tender princes, use my babies well!

An armored humvee rumbled up, interrupting his recitation, and more soldiers clattered out. Soldiers extended their dark handguns toward Stan's kneeling form. He heard voices as if from far away. He opened his eyes, praying, his lips moving. A tiny motion on his right caught his attention; in a sunny patch in the grass some fifteen feet to the side, a honeybee worked in white clover flowers. Stan no longer cared what happened to him, and he wanted to crawl to the bee and lie down in the grass to watch. He would pray in that position on his side and rest. But then he thought that he should start crawling on his hands and knees to the abortion building. He leaned forward, put his hands on the ground, and moved his right arm and right knee. While soldiers kept their weapons ready, two others picked Stan up under the armpits and dragged him away from the forbidden zone toward the humvee. They stretched him out on the pavement on his stomach, cuffed his wrists behind his back, patted him down, and ran a metal detector over the length of his body. Seeing that he did not move, other than shifting his head to make it more comfortable, they eased him to his back and repeated the scan. The handcuffs dug into his wrists.

Next, they carefully loaded him into the back seat of the humvee and sped off, as he remembered the last line from that *Richard III* scene: "So foolish sorrow bids your stones farewell," and then a soldier blindfolded him.

*I am in a brightly lit auditorium full of people. Rows of chairs rise from the front to back. Looking down, I see someone familiar—a person from high school who was killed in an automobile accident. Champion—that's his name—had been driving his sports car at high speed near where I once lived. People coming in the opposite direction saw his car hit the bank and flip end-over-end. They drove to our house to call 911. I jumped in the car with them to see if I could help. When I got there, the body was warm but dead. The face was messed up, and I was repelled from trying CPR. I did not know it was Champion until the state patrol arrived, and over the officer's shoulder, I saw his license photo. For a long while after I felt guilty that I did not attempt to save him. But here in the auditorium he is alive! Champion is happy and smiling, and his face looks as young as it did in high school. I am so full of shock, relief, amazement, joy—that I am speechless. I ask him about what has happened. He laughs and shows me he is wearing a mask. He's not Champion, but someone else. I wake up and realize it was a dream. Champion died. He is dead.*

**–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons**



***Celilo Falls on the way to Brogan, OR. Circa 1957.***
PHOTO POSSIBLY BY A RELATIVE OF THE AUTHOR

## Chapter 26
# Rescues

Stan awoke with an abrupt jerk. He had dreamed he slipped from an ice face in the North Cascades and the rope caught him, but it woke him up, too. There was nothing in the 7 x 12 foot cell to tell him how long he had been sleeping. He was lying on his back. Attached to the high ceiling above was a light bulb glaring through a steel cage. Outside the bars of the cell, in an upper corner, a video camera stared impartially at him. The walls still smelled of linseed oil and were uniformly glossy beige. Beside him sat a tiny stainless steel sink, and next to the sink a steel commode. None of this had changed.

How long had he been in this windowless room, disconnected from the sun-and-moon-ordered world, withdrawn from natural rhythms and cycles of day and night?

They had brought him here directly from the abortion site without processing. The next morning a doctor and assistant had come in and conducted an exhaustive physical examination. Then they drew blood and left. Other than the guards, the medical personnel were the only people he had seen. For the first time in his life, he had no knowledge of direction. As he grew up, with Mt. Hood in the east, the Columbia River to the south, and the Pacific Ocean in the west, orientation to his place in the world always had been strong. Stan felt as if he had been within these walls forever and he would never leave. He wondered if he had invented memories of an outside life. These bare walls had become the sum and definition of his existence. He had to pinch himself to stop this foolish thinking.

Apart from any evidence, he believed that his cell door faced south, and this artificial bearing helped him stay sane. He had tried to keep count of passing days by scratching marks in the wall with his fingernail. This helped him connect with the past, because the number of marks had a limit. The clues were meals,

two a day, except at first when he arrived they brought no meals and he became hungry. But on some days, there had been three meals. This might have thrown off his count, and also he probably slept in the daytime occasionally—he had slept a lot at first. For meals, two guards—always two, and often new guards so he could not give them names—had entered a tiny foyer outside his cell by the armored door that contained a face-high reinforced window. The foyer made it so that the guards did not have to enter the cell, apart from searches. One guard would slide the tray over a counter through a slot in the bars while the other guard watched. They did not speak, unless to ask for his dirty laundry every so often. He wished they would give him underwear, but the omission saved him from washing it by hand. If he was correct, it had been twenty-one days since his arrest. From the duration of the blindfolded ride, he knew he was within a few hours of Vancouver, Washington.

Stan had often asked for books or magazines, but the guards never gave him anything other than clean linen, jumpsuits, soap, and food. Food: chicken or turkey, instant mashed potatoes, canned gravy, frozen string beans, canned peaches, too-sweet cherry cobbler, greasy donuts, artificial juice, powdered milk, and dry white bread. Once, there was a respectable hamburger. Once, a thick bean soup. Twice, Mexican. Once, a fresh salad—once. Stan always ate everything because portions were small; however, last night he flushed some suspicious meat down the toilet. The cooked food was always slightly above room temperature. With this insumptuous diet and an intense regime of exercise and isometrics, he had already lost the weight he had gained while living with the Hutterites.

The guards never brought him mail, or paper and pen, or news from the outside, or visitors, or fresh air. They never answered questions. If he forgot, they demanded the plastic spoon when they picked up the tray, which was when they delivered the next meal. This was why Stan washed his tray in the sink. Acquiring a weapon or contraband material was impossible, and this made the impromptu whole-room and body searches even more inexplicable and humiliating. They handcuffed him during searches, and while he sat restrained on the bed, they mopped the cell floor. He was thankful for that.

He had tapped on the walls to try to communicate with prisoners who might be in neighboring cells, but without result. The guards never said anything about the tapping noise, even though it seemed loud to him. To pass the waking hours, he began reliving in his mind, hour upon hour, his whole life in detail, from his earliest memories, broken into chapters. Not knowing how long—it could be years—that he would be kept alone, he reveled in these recollections and tried not to jump ahead in time. Like a television series syndicated in reruns, remembering would keep him entertained. He attempted to avoid the few years with Mindy and the children, but they came unbidden anyway, especially images of Mindy and him in physical intimacy. Lydia, too, forced into his mind.

As he inspected every detail of his past, he became reacquainted with his parents and with forgotten people. The neighbors who gave him a giant *papier-mâché* dinosaur when he was a boy. He remembered a thin, bald-headed woman he saw when he first got his driver's license—she slowly crossed a gravel driveway. He prayed for her, and then other people came to him. The man pushing a lawnmower into the door of an ice cream parlor. He thought of Esther in Steilacoom Hospital, the disturbed woman Mindy had befriended. What had happened to her? And Sarah's catatonic roommate? What about the red-haired girl in college who had a crush on him? She had brought her golden retriever into his dorm room. In the summer she wrote him a letter; he wrote back and he never heard from her again. So many people. All his schoolteachers. Hundreds of vignettes. He wondered about the neo-Original People he had traveled with in the Cascades, the boys in British Columbia, and the college student with the firetruck. How were they getting along? So many unfinished conversations. The only way he knew to tie up the loose ends was to pray for the people. For their peace and joy and prosperity. He poured his heart into praying. When he needed a break from humankind, he polished every bit of poetry and all the lines of plays and Bible verses he had memorized since he had been a child, and he was amazed how they came back, these words he thought he had forgotten. When he wanted to rest, he either hummed or sang Hutterite hymns much slower than even they sang them.

This mental activity became a discipline to ward off laziness, and more importantly, the hopeless spinning of fears. The songs especially gave him companionship, calm, and strength. Time had passed quickly, if time existed at all.

On this particular night—he guessed it was still night—he must have slept a few moments and slipped into the dream of falling, which woke him.

He tried to relax. He shifted to a new position on his bed and pulled the single blanket over his eyes to block out the light bulb, and at length, he drifted back to sleep, despite the cold. It was often cold. Hours later—it must have been hours—he awakened again and knew he could sleep no more, which meant it must be morning. He arose and ran the water several minutes to try to freshen it up—it never became cold. The cell was cold and the water warm. He then drank deeply and rinsed his face. Next, he began Episode One of his exercises. He stretched until he became bored and changed to performing sets of pushups, sit-ups, and aerobic movements until "brunch" arrived. By then he was hungry, but he began eating slowly, exploring the food for a hint of novelty and savoring what flavors and sensations it was possible to enjoy.

Oddly, today the guards did not leave. Sitting on his bed with the tray on his lap rather than using the small bench and counter that jutted from the wall, Stan kept glancing up at them and wondering if he should attempt conversation. He had occasionally asked questions of the guards—about their families and whatnot, but they had acted like he had not spoken. When he was done with the food, he stood to wash the tray in the sink with his hand, as was his habit. One of the guards said, "I'll take that. You're receiving a visitor today," and then the guards left.

A visitor. A visitor. Stan was excited like a child poised to blow out birthday candles. Having had so little stimulation, the idea of any congenial human contact, or even of any in-depth hostile contact, put all larger apprehensions aside.

His routine included washing his face twice a day, washing armpits once a day, and a whole-body wash every three days. They had never let him out to a shower room, and so he used soap and water with a washcloth. This day he broke routine and

splurged with an extra whole-body wash, including his hair, and afterwards he waited, sitting on his bed, holding his hands folded on his lap. He waited, and despite his increased mental acumen, he could not guess who the visitor might be. All his speculation was unsatisfactory: anyone he wanted to see would not dare to come. These hours felt longer than his weeks in jail, and he fidgeted. When he heard the turn of locks in the outside door, his mind blanked in a second of fierce anxiety, and before he knew it, the tiny vestibule was full of people. A short argument ensued among them, but in the next moment the guards left, and before him stood a pleasant-looking, ruddy-complexioned man in an expensive dark-gray suit. He was in his late forties.

"Hello, Stanley Timmons, my name is Hardy Ravenell. I'm your attorney," he said jovially. "Normally, we would visit in a room with thick glass between us, but they don't want you out and about in this facility. You wouldn't believe the search I just went through. Ugh."

Hardy Ravenell squeezed as much of his hand through the bars as he could, and Stan took it in a handshake and said, "Why are you so late?"

Ravenell appeared to be shocked by the joke and withdrew his hand. Anguish washed across his face. He pushed the pain away, and a sober cheerfulness returned.

"How are you?"

"I'm well."

Ravenell sighed. "There's much to talk about. As far as being late, I only volunteered yesterday to represent you. The court presiding over your case appointed others, and they refused. Another attorney stepped forward, and they arrested him on conspiracy. It's been a mess. Mr. Timmons, the government has no intention of giving you a fair trial. You certainly won't be tried publicly. I'm technically your attorney, if you sign these papers, but honestly, I'm not here to give you legal counsel, because no defense will be effective. I'm here strictly on humanitarian grounds."

Ravenell looked up over his shoulder at the security camera and said, louder, "And I don't care *who* is listening."

His voice returned to conversation levels. "I only heard about your incarceration from talk around the legal community.

Rumor said the government planned to execute you quietly in a matter of days after a secret hearing conducted without your participation, without you being present. If nothing else, I may have prevented that by coming here."

Ravenell stopped talking and sighed deeply again.

Since his arrest, Stan had developed an impartial view toward his fate. Much of his life was now out of his control, and therefore he had been concerned with the responsibility remaining to him within confines of his cell. He had read of Hardy Ravenell, reputed to be a man who defended the indefensible—the premiere private attorney in the Portland Metro area—and Stan was not suspicious of him in the least. Rather, he was moved by the apparent risk Ravenell was taking, and tears filled his eyes. Stan had been so long without speaking to anyone other than himself and God that words did not come easily. But he said, "Thank you. I'll be fine."

Ravenell searched Stan's cell with his eyes. "Is there anything you need, Stan? How have you been treated?" His eyes stopped on Stan's face.

Several moments passed before Stan answered, "I've been treated okay. But I would like some reading material. The Book of Common Prayer would be nice—they took mine—or classical novels . . . a history. I've been thinking lately about the Roman Empire. There's a book I remember about the lives of the Caesars. Maybe you could find this? Or any children's novels. And some fresh air. It's stale in here. And have I received any mail? I would like paper and a pen."

Ravenell looked away, hunting in his mind for a way to help. "I'll get them to give you reading material. Let me see what I can do." He paused and said, "How's the food?"

"Umm. I could stand more salad."

From his briefcase Ravenell removed a file folder, took some papers and fed them through the bars. He clicked a pen and gave it to Stan. "Here, sign at the x's. They say that you agree for me to represent you." Stan signed the papers and began to hand them and the pen back.

"Keep the pen, and here's another. They're both expensive, I'm afraid. And . . . here's your copy of the agreement. I

suppose you can write on the back of it for now. Oh! Here's a yellow pad. Is there anything else you need? Anything at all."

Stan was too excited to reflect clearly. During these days in prison he had developed a highly focused mind, but in isolation. The presence of another human being interfered with his thinking. There was something . . . He closed his eyes and tried to put his brain in neutral. He pretended he was alone. "Okay, I have it," he said laughing. "What day is it, and what time?"

The attorney studied his watch that was made of gold and ornamented with diamonds. "I'd give you my watch, but it would be stolen. I'll see what I can do. Today is Monday, October 22. 2:35 p.m."

"I lost a day."

Ravenell rapped on the door with his ring; the guards came in, and one of them said to Stan, "Give me the pens."

Ravenell shook his head and said firmly, "No." The guard compliantly dropped his arm.

"It's been nice meeting you, Stan." Ravenell reached in to shake Stan's hand as before. "I'll try to get back tomorrow to see you again." Still holding Stan's hand, he leaned forward as if to speak privately, and the guards pricked up their ears. Intentionally, so the microphones could hear, Ravenell made his voice cheerful and solid as he said, "I knew your mother, Stan. She was a librarian when I was a kid, at the Multnomah Library. She always showed me the best books. I owe her an unrepayable debt." He let Stan's hand go and walked out the door.

The metal door clanged shut, and Stan thought of a dozen questions he should have asked. But he took his pen and paper and began scribbling notes for Ravenell's next visit. With the arrival of this first visitor, Stan's universe had changed again. Later that evening—he had confidence that it was evening—he could hardly sleep, and he added a set of exercises to calm himself down, and then he slept with no problem.

† † †

He awakened to the hollow sound of the armored door opening.

"What time is it?" he asked, not expecting an answer.

Shockingly, the guard answered, "0620 hours. Breakfast."

"No! Why so early?"

"Routine."

"Whose routine? Not mine."

No answer.

Stan hoped Ravenell would bring him a watch of his own.

He ate the breakfast—hot oatmeal with raisins and real milk, and a glass of orange juice; he washed the plasticware and then sat. What was he to do? His inner clock told him he had not wakened this early for a long while. He needed a few more hours of sleep. He sat on his bed, leaned against the wall, and dozed. The door hollowly rang again with the locks snapping, and it creaked open on its hinges.

"This is a busy day," Stan said, sitting up.

The guards came in, took the tray, tossed him two pairs of boxer shorts, and departed. That was different. "But nothing to jump for joy about," he said out loud and lay back down.

He closed his eyes to sleep, but couldn't. He opened his eyes and mouth and stared blankly. There was something different about the room—a smell. He sat up. From the corner of his eye, he caught a small black form not belonging. He jerked his head, and seeing the object sitting in the slot that usually kept his empty tray, he jumped up for a closer look. Now, this was a miracle! His prayer book! He took the leather-bound volume, opened it, and filled his nose and lungs with the perfume rising from its pages. "Thank heaven!" he exclaimed.

Stan washed up, ran through his exercises, and plopped on the bed to read. The hours sped by and he began to feel hungry, his stomach growling. Another meal came: meatloaf, French fries, a piece of chocolate cake in a plastic package, and, astoundingly, a tossed salad containing chunks of carrots, tomatoes, and cheese and a diverse array of greens with ranch dressing in a small bowl. Bemused by the extravagance, Stan said, "Maybe Ravenell was mistaken. This is my last meal and they're going to shoot me."

He was eating heartily when Ravenell arrived—weary and disheveled, carrying his briefcase. Dandruff spotted the collar and shoulders of his suit. He sat down hard on the chair that a guard had brought in.

"I couldn't find a parking spot and had to walk eight blocks to the rendezvous from where they bring me here, blindfolded. I've

been working all night. You keep eating while I talk. This may be the last occasion I can see you, Stan. The government wants to move you from the Pacific Northwest. I predict you'll be transferred soon and given another lawyer. My counsel is to be cautious with him. I will go further—you shouldn't cooperate with your lawyer at all. The report going around is that there will be a trial, but it'll be a sham, just so the government can propagandize about the threat to national security. I don't really know any more. If I were you, I'd prepare for the worst."

"What are their charges against me?"

"You don't know?"

"Nobody official has said a thing to me."

"They didn't? Did they interrogate you?"

"No."

Ravenell stopped dead, but only for a fraction of a second. Stan glanced up, and one of Ravenell's eyes flicked.

"Well, no matter," Ravenell resumed. "The outcome will be the same." He bent down, opened his briefcase, and pulled out a single sheet of paper. "This is a summary we've prepared of the indictments. The details are not important because, as I said, the trial won't be real. You'll have to hypothesize on your own as to the reasons, because speculation about the government's motives is what got your first volunteer counsel arrested. I can't help you there. You can see treason and sedition at the top of the list and there are also federalized charges of murder and interfering with interstate commerce. If you want the whole indictment—"

"No, I'd rather read more edifying material."

"Okay, I thought as much."

Here Ravenell reached down to his briefcase again and fished out an envelope. "I think you'll want to read this?"

Stan took the letter and examined the envelope. There was no return address. The envelope had been opened. Stan desperately wanted to read it now, but he tucked it into the prayer book.

"Well, here's more good stuff." Ravenell proceeded to hand things to Stan from his briefcase through the food slot. "I had it delivered overnight. It's been minutely inspected, believe me."

There was an old-fashioned windup watch and a container of vitamins "freshly delivered from the pharmacy," Ravenell said. Next came book after book, all new paperbacks. It was like

having opened a treasure chest. Stan held every book, feasted his eyes on each cover, and then said, "I'm, I'm overcome . . . with appreciation. This . . . must have cost money."

Ravenell waved. "Not at all, Stan."

"Thank you, the same."

"Just wish I could do more. My one regret is that I couldn't arrange for fresh air, but I expect you'll be traveling and getting it in the next few days. I would offer to represent you at the trial, but I have my own family and work. I'll hazard saying that your best defense would be to put the government on trial, and I'd not remain free long if I helped you do that, even if the government allowed me to appear with you in court. I'm afraid that all I can offer is friendship. You seem to have done well in jail. You look healthy."

"So far, I am. So far."

Ravenell furtively inspected his watch.

Stan never gave the usual jail sounds much heed when he was alone, but with a guest he became intensely aware of what Ravenell was hearing. A red light on the video camera blinked, and the camera emitted a high-pitched whine. Ravenell listened to booming coming through the walls, floors, and ceiling. The booming ceased and near silence resumed dominion. Stale, cool air whispered from a duct. The light bulb buzzed. Stan's sinuses tickled, and he sniffed. Ravenell pushed a stiff yawn into his fist. Stan sat immobile, looking at the floor. Sounds receded into the background, and the men sat noiselessly. Ravenell had been leaning back in his chair with his legs crossed. He noticed his foot suspended above the floor, the tip of the shoe pulsing up and down with every heartbeat. Uneasy, he uncrossed his legs. He looked at his watch again and shifted positions on the chair. Stan felt his own heartbeat racing, excited about the letter. He tried to control his breathing.

"Must be hard staying in here all alone," Ravenell said at last.

"Huh?" Stan said. He had been enjoying the human company, though no words had been exchanged between them for the past few minutes. The reality of his isolation returned. As compassionate as Ravenell was, he couldn't possibly understand how hard it had been, but Stan could tell him how he had been provisioned. "Oh, it's not as bad as you think." Stan paused,

remembering, and then continued. "As a boy, I loaded hay for a neighbor who kept a herd of dairy cows. It was so hot, and sweat poured from my skin. The air in the barn was filled with dust that itched and got into my nose. The sun beat down and my arms ached from work. But every so often, when the heat seemed the worst, a breeze would come along and cool my face. The breath of air brought the refreshment I needed for the next few minutes, and later there were more breezes. As the hours passed, the sun sank lower until we worked in the cool and dark. I have thought a lot about summer hay work. But the point is this: Every day here I have a breath of refreshment. You've been the breath yesterday and today, and you've brought me enough to last awhile. Later, there will be more."

Ravenell grimaced and did not know what to say. He reached into his briefcase again. "I almost forgot. Notebooks."

Stan smiled. "Thank you again, my friend. Your briefcase is a magic hat."

"I must be going." Ravenell stood up.

"Farewell," Stan said. "But one more thing. How do they know who I am?"

"I'm not precisely sure. I guess that the soldiers who arrested you ran a search and identified you. They'd been briefed already, as had the civilian police departments. But you should know this: An acquaintance of yours, a Rev. Schmidt, reported your whereabouts before you were arrested. He's trying to claim the bounty money—I doubt he will get it. Strangely, nothing about you came out in the media. I think the government is reticent about publicizing the husband of the beautiful young woman who was brutally murdered before the whole world."

Ravenell's next words flowed on without a break, which told Stan this reference to Mindy was significant. Ravenell continued talking as if he intended to distract the government listeners from the importance that he attributed to Mindy's death. He was saying, "So, to answer your question, I suppose they confirmed your identity with fingerprints or DNA evidence."

"I have never had my fingerprints taken, nor DNA samples."

"Not to your knowledge."

"Hmmm . . . Another question: Where am I?"

"You are in a holding cell in a federal courthouse, I believe. Or some courthouse. They blindfold me and drive me here in a car. In case you are wondering, the guards bring your meals from the county jail kitchen. I have guessed that much."

"Which explains why they're not hot."

Ravenell tapped the door, and it opened promptly. He waved to Stan cheerily, bowed, and smiled.

Stan said "Thank you" as Ravenell left without another word. Stan stared at the door for a minute, trying to guess what might have been left unsaid. It couldn't be about food.

He stretched out on the bed, pulled up his blanket, and removed the letter from the prayer book. He inspected the pastel green envelope carefully. The postmark was Portland. Though the letter did not bear her name, he knew it was from Lydia. Stan scanned the handwritten script and then read it again, delighting in every detail.

> October 7, 2018
>
> Dear Stan,
>
> After you left, I wished I had come with you. When Israel came home, he called and told me all about your trip, and then I was glad I did not come. We know you have been arrested, and I sent this letter to the Vancouver police department. If I had been arrested too, we would surely have been separated, but I am free and I can send you a letter now and again. I know you can never write back. I'm glad to not add to your burden by worrying about me. I am safe—not where we went, but north. Israel read your letter to me over the telephone. I enjoyed hearing about your travel in your own words.
>
> There is hard news. Shortly after Israel arrived home, he got into an argument with men passing through the neighborhood, and they hurt him. The men did not stay, thankfully, and won't come back. But Israel might not recover. He sacrificed himself for the neighborhood. Some friends have taken him to his parents' home, and my younger sister has left here to join him, and I think you know what this means? Even in the sorrow there is

joy. There may be a wedding. I long to attend, but circumstances do not permit.

The garden here where I am visiting is nearly spent, but I had freshened it with flowering plants from the market, which I am sure you would enjoy. Guess what they are? . . . Good, I am sure you guessed chrysanthemums! I will bring in a bouquet for the dinner table every day. They are not big showy blooms, but I like them anyway. I would like to start my own plants of those next year. I've pressed a tiny bud and enclosed it for you. I've also sown a cover crop over the garden, and the seeds have already germinated.

I can't forget when you put your arm around me during our last minutes together. Though this was quite chaste, in my heart I consider us bound as man and wife. This was our consummation—all we may ever have. I spoke with my father, and he allowed me to take a vow to remain committed to you for as long as you are alive. I have made this vow without ritual or ceremony. Thus, we are married, as I had hoped, if you agree. I have no way of knowing your answer, but I trust it will be *yes*. Israel said he would give me your ring if we return home from our journey. He hoped this would be okay.

So Stanley, you have another reason to live. You have a wife after all! I do not presume to think I can replace your own dear wife and mother of your children, at least not unless we can live together, which does not seem likely, ever. But it may be that thoughts of me will help you stay hopeful, for as long as you remain in this troubled world.

I pray for you and your children without ceasing.

I love you, Stanley.

Your sister in Christ,

There was no signature. Stan wished he had given her a coded name, but it never came to mind that she could ever correspond with him. A name was not necessary, but it would have been nice. Israel was Jacob. She could have signed "Indigo," as Lydia of the New Testament was a seller of purple cloth. But it

didn't matter. Stan was impressed with how little information could be derived by the government from the text of the letter. She did a good job. Surely, she had help in drafting it. North?—she must have left Montana and gone to a relative's colony in Alberta. And how did the letter get from Alberta to be mailed from a post office in Portland? Another mystery in a life of mystery.

He peered into the envelope and found no pressed flower inside. He put his nose close and breathed deeply, capturing a trace of the distinctive chrysanthemum scent.

In his heart, Stan consented to Lydia's vow of commitment, and he whispered his vow to her. He smiled and took her hand in imagination. Part of him regretted not marrying her at the colony, but then he could not have fulfilled the larger purpose God had for him. It had been confusing. It took leaving her and the colony to establish the emotional detachment that allowed him to face being arrested. Only being in jail freed his emotions, and his conscience, so that he knew that he loved her and wanted to marry her. But once he left and followed this course, he couldn't return. The way it worked out was best. At times, usually when he awoke in the night, he thought himself insane for having left the colony, but regrets were useless and he was able to shake them off. Lydia's letter helped.

He now had new things to think about, and his mind spun to follow every variation of meaning. Jacob's injuries clearly resulted from a violent fight to ward off raiders. He prayed for Jacob's recovery. One of the other questions he had to think about concerned Ravenell's mysterious wink—his flick of the eye. It could be suggestive of the government's disarray that he had not been interrogated. Or maybe the interrogation would come later in an unexpected form, and he should be wary. It was hard to tell. Fr. Schmidt's betrayal of him to the GiP seemed to be characteristic of an over-conscientious man who changed with the waves of the sea. But since reporting Stan came when it would make no difference, possibly Schmidt had not intended to betray him as much as to protect himself—by feigning allegiance to the GiP. Hopefully, he had said nothing about Jacob. Schmidt also might consider how to use the bounty money to benefit the Assembly. Stan finally put these and other questions

away. He would be able to stew about them later. Now he wanted to look more closely at the books!

Stan examined each book lovingly. He read the back covers and the prefaces of all of them, relishing every word, weighing what book he should begin first. He made his selection—a travel book, rather than a novel—and began devouring the words. After several hours, he decided to ration his reading, working it into his routine, to make the books last. He took a reflective pleasure in simply looking at the neat pile of them on the floor.

The wristwatch gave him greater control of his world, assisting in discipline and the disposing of the day. It also gave him perspective on the outside world, because the sounds through the walls and the appearances of meals were fairly regular. He made notes of daily events like a meteorologist would of rainfall and atmospheric pressure—over time he would be able to discern global patterns from tracking local details. He ached to see the sky and to have the light bulb turned off at night.

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Eight days after Ravenell's departure, Stan was startled from sleep by the armored door opening. Two guards appeared. Stan's eyes burned with dryness as he squinted at his watch. 3:10 a.m.!

"Why are you inspecting at this unseemly hour?" he asked, not expecting any reply.

"You're being moved." Amazingly, a guard had answered.

"Where?" Again, Stan did not expect a reply.

"We have orders to meet another transport," the guard said and motioned for Stan to turn around to be blindfolded.

"What about my things? My prayer book and my other books. My writing notebooks."

"They'll be sent along, I'm sure. But you better hold on to your Bible there."

Stan reached out blind for the prayer book—he did not need his eyes open to know where it was in the cell.

"Here, I'll take it," the guard said. "We have to handcuff you. We'll skip the shackles."

Stan put his hands behind him, they tightened the cuffs, and to his thrill and satisfaction, edged with apprehension, they led him

out the door. They went straight ahead on a concrete floor and in a few yards turned left. In five steps there was another door, heavily secured. This door opened, complaining, and Stan breathed in the first real fresh air in a month. It was cold and damp. He sneezed. The guard said, "Bless you." Stan had not realized how close his cell had been to the outdoors. Two steps down, and they stopped. He was standing on a paved surface.

The guard who had been speaking put his hand on Stan's shoulder and said quietly, "I'm not supposed to do this." He unlocked the handcuffs and told Stan to put his hands in front of him to be cuffed more comfortably.

"Put them on behind him," a voice stabbed from the dark, and Stan realized that there were more than two guards now. Stan heard breathing and moving of feet and estimated that a dozen guards, police, or FBI agents were on hand for this transfer.

"Yes, sir," the kind guard said meekly and handcuffed him as before. They walked him up a step and into the back of a prisoner van and strapped him into a seat. There were guards in the back with him and no one spoke. The drive lasted a half hour or longer. There seemed to be an inordinate number of turns, or doubling back, or loops.

Suddenly, the van stopped and the guards guided him outside and walked him to another vehicle, a car.

They put him—still blindfolded—into the back seat, and he had to sit forward because his arms were pinned behind him. The drive lasted maybe an hour. He guessed that besides a driver there was another person who rode shotgun. He could smell cigarette smoke. He could hear muffled voices through the security glass between the back and front seats. Stan repeatedly asked in a loud voice if they could crack a window for him. He eventually gave up asking. Headlights shone and flashed from close behind them—a following car, part of an entourage.

His car turned sharply and pulled to a stop. Everything went dark. The door opened, and Stan was ordered "Get out!" in a low, tense voice. With a strong arm hooking each elbow they marched him along into a building. The lights were dim. They stepped onto a blindingly bright elevator—light leaked in around the blindfold—and up they went. The elevator door opened onto a bright hallway and they turned left, swung right, and stopped.

A door lock hummed, clicked, and they entered a darkened room. The door closed. Stan halted, frozen inside the door, but his handlers grabbed and hustled him across the room, removed his handcuffs, fastened an iron ring around his leg, and at last one of the persons spoke in a shaking, angry voice.

"You will leave your blindfold on until we exit the room. You will not look at our faces. If you do, we'll kill you. Lie down and go to sleep."

The door opened, light flooded in, and the men left, noisily locking the door behind them. Stan was alone.

He knelt down and felt along the floor, then crawled on his hands and knees while dragging a chain, which appeared to be fastened to a fixture embedded in the wall. He found a bed—a hard box with a stiff mattress—and climbed onto the bed and waited, asking several times "Is anyone there?" before he ventured to remove the blindfold. He glanced around and saw that he was in a modified hotel room.

"Sleep," the guard had ordered. *Sleep?* Stan almost laughed. Sleep was impossible.

He walked around to the extent the chain allowed, which was everywhere except to the window or the door. He explored the bathroom, which contained towels, soap, a sink with hot running water, and a shower. The two lamps in the main room worked. There was a television. He powered the television and quickly cycled through the channels. The cable had been disconnected and there was nothing interesting playing on the local stations. He left the television on as company. Colorful, framed paintings hung on the walls. There was a table against the wall and a chair, nothing else. The only things out of the ordinary were that one of the beds had been removed and the windows were shuttered up with metal plating. No telephone and no radio. He began stripping off his prison garb and discovered a serious impediment to undressing: the leg iron and chain. The undershirt came off and he worked out of the jumpsuit, but he had to slide his boxer shorts and jumpsuit down the chain so that he could shower, which he did blissfully. He dried off with a fluffy white towel, and, dragging the chain and his clothing, he crawled naked into the bed. The sheets were clean.

He propped up on the pillow and looked at the television. A farm program was on. He switched channels. The Oregon public education channel showed a Spanish language program. He was in Oregon! But where? It didn't matter. He watched the Spanish program for awhile. When this was over, he turned off the television. "I'll catch up on news later," he said. He wanted to read. His prayer book? It and the paperbacks had not come with him. Maybe they would arrive later, but he had an idea. He rolled to the edge of the bed and opened the bureau's top drawer. Sure enough, there was a Gideon Bible. He opened it at Jeremiah and read until he felt drowsy. It was a luxury to reach up and switch the electric light bulb off before drifting into a peaceful sleep.

Minute sparks of young daylight glowed through holes in the steel plating that covered the windows.

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Stan woke and realized that someone had been in the room. The door clicking shut had awakened him. His watch said he had slept three hours. Food. He smelled breakfast and saw a tray sitting on the floor toward the door, with a neat stack of folded clothing next to it. Stan got up, remembered the loathsome chain, searched for and pulled on his old boxer shorts, which had been threaded by the chain, and went to see the clothing—a fresh denim-blue prison jumpsuit, smelling of dye, like new school clothes, and stiff, clean underwear. Stan laughed. How was he supposed to put these on with his ankle chained to the floor? He put on the clean white T-shirt and took the tray to the table. Before he began eating, he recalled his routine in his former cell. The security of habits tugged at him. Usually he washed his face and did exercises before he ate. Well, he could fix it later. The long night and the stress of moving had made him hungry.

He began eating, and a thought came to him. He got up and turned on the television and tuned it to a morning news magazine program. What he saw swept away the preoccupation with food. The subject matter, the atmosphere, and the expressions on the faces of the hosts, interviewees, and news announcers had degraded since he had last watched television. Or was it that his perception had changed? The people seemed to be wearing

masks of skin, masks that concealed the truth about themselves and the stories they told. Stan did not hear their voices but only watched their faces—visages that told him their words were lies and pretense. When he turned up the volume to listen, he received another wound to his sensibility—the news was void of crisis. There was no hint or insinuation that the nation was in turmoil, and no criticism of the government at all. Had the government taken over the networks? Or were the networks voluntarily sailing with the wind of the age? One thing stood out above all: It was in the commercials, the jokes, some of the news, the selection of stories, the clothing the people wore, their smirks, the tone of their voices, the additional meanings attributed to words. Almost everything turned around sexuality.

How different this was from the last television he saw—watching his wife die. On her face was nothing but earnest passion for justice. He rose from the bed, angry tears burning his eyes, and, disgusted at what the dominant human society had become, he hammered the television switch with the heel of his fist. He finished his meal, thinking of nothing.

The air conditioning unit in the window was working, but he could not reach the controls. The temperature was cool. Stan felt comfortable with more clothes on, and after he did his exercises, he worked back into the old jail suit. A knocking startled him, and his door opened. In walked two swaggering guards wearing bandanas over their faces; their movements and nonverbal communication were unlike those of the guards in his previous prison. They grunted to each other and then eyed the corners of the room while Stan remained prone on his back watching a children's program. Next, an obscenely obese young man in a white shirt and black tie entered. Curly brown hair flowed onto his shoulders and down his back. He carried a suit coat draped over his arm, and from his other hand hung a well-used leather briefcase. One guard backed up against a wall and stood erect, shifting his feet. The other stepped outside into the hallway and locked the door behind him.

Stan turned off the television and stood up. The man's face was clean shaven and pale. Though he must have been in his mid-twenties and was full of energy, folds of flesh bulged out from under his chin and he carried a shocking amount of mass on

the rest of his body. His bulk and his hair inspired awe, as did his powerful tenor voice. "Mr. Timmons, I'll be your defense lawyer for your trial. My name is Warren. Well, it's not my real name." The man extended his hand to shake with Stan, but Stan, instinctively feeling mistrustful of this person, did not take it.

Warren shrugged a shoulder and looked Stan over. "A lot of people are scared to death of you, but you don't look that intimidating." The man nodded to the guard and flicked his hand for him to leave, which he did.

When the door was locked again, Warren said, "Now we can speak privately. Call me anything you like."

"How about if I called you . . ." He was about to say "Judas." "I'll call you Warren. *Mr. W*arren?"

"Call me Mr. Warren." He shook his curls. "I don't care what the hell you call me. Is your room comfortable? I suppose so."

Stan had been bored with days of confinement, but he was already bored with this lawyer. He decided he would not call the man anything, if he could help it. "Well . . . sir, what do you recommend is the best course for my defense?"

"You are aware of the charges against you, are you not?"

"Yes."

"You are aware that these are capital offenses? Meaning, if found guilty, you can receive the death penalty."

"Yes."

"I have been notified that the U.S. attorney will seek the death penalty."

"I anticipated this."

"Okay. Mr. Timmons, I won't lie to you." Warren strode to the desk and eased into the chair, which creaked wretchedly under his weight. "I have spent hours poring over the affidavits filed against you. The evidence is, well, the evidence is staggering. I'm a student of history—I majored in religion as an undergrad—and I've not heard of such an expansive conspiracy to overthrow a First World government, ever. I realize your capacity in the conspiracy was minor, but your personal links to the leadership put you in a difficult spot, Mr. Timmons. The government will make an irrefutable case that it was your civic duty to report the acts and plans of sedition, and murder and

kidnapping—of which you were fully aware—to the proper authorities."

Stan sat on the edge of the bed. "You're arguing for the prosecution."

"Mr. Timmons, I am *trying* to help you. You don't appreciate how difficult my job is. My whole life has been about defending people like you. I have conversations like this all day long, and frankly, I don't have time. The best we can hope for is to plea-bargain and save your life. If you will admit to your limited role in sedition and treason, the government may forego prosecuting murder and kidnapping charges."

"But isn't it likely that murder and kidnapping are the weakest? What do I gain by having the murder and kidnapping charges dropped? If I'm tried on them, I might win."

"Yes, but the government is anxious for a scapegoat, and my impression is—and I have spoken with the assistant U.S. attorney, your prosecutor, who is handling this—my impression is they will move heaven and earth to find you guilty on all charges, if forced to a trial. In other words, Mr. Timmons, the verdict is a foregone conclusion, and if you insist on a trial, you will be terminated. You can possibly save your life, a crumb of self-respect, and the government a great deal of trouble by pleading guilty to sedition and treason."

Stan mulled this over, pacing the room, dragging his chain. "Can you take this blasted thing off?" he said in frustration.

Warren walked to the door and pounded. Instantly, the door opened. Warren whispered to the guard, who still wore a bandana over his face. The guard gave a key to the attorney, who in turn gave it to Stan. Stan clicked the shaft in the lock and set the lock on the dresser. He tried not to show repugnance for Warren, who appeared to be in league with his jailers.

"Okay," Stan said, "You can arrange this plea-bargain?"

"I believe so. I'll try."

"Do . . . do I have to sign anything?"

"I expect you will sign a confession."

"No. I mean, do I have to sign anything that signifies I've engaged you as my attorney?"

"Wha . . . weah, heh, hell," Warren laughed. "In normal cases, but this case is extremely abnormal. Think about it. Your

holding cell is a hotel room? You have guessed that, right? The trial will be conducted in a . . . well, shall we say *not* a courthouse? Due to the nature of this case, and others like it, we have been forced to improvise. No. No written agreement is necessary. You can have me, or nobody." Warren smiled. "And even if you don't want me, I'll represent you anyway. You might not believe this, but I have no choice in the matter."

"What happens if you refuse this job?"

His voice suddenly icy, Warren said, "None of your concern. Don't worry about me." But the smile came back as he said, "Sorry. I misspoke just now. I choose to perform my job willingly. I'm trying to help you. See, I already got that egregious chain off. Well, that's all for today. Think about it. If you have any questions, write them down and we'll talk again tomorrow. This is Thursday. I'll be here in the early morning. Decide soon because the trial is set to begin Monday. Let me know something tomorrow so I have time to prepare, if we go to trial. But a trial should be out of the question. You will die."

"Will this give you enough time to prepare for a trial?"

"Well, no. But, as I said, this isn't standard."

"Couldn't you ask to delay the trial?"

Warren loudly pushed air from his lungs in exasperation. "I suppose I could ask for a continuance on Monday. But a plea-bargain is your best option. It's in your best interest."

Stan felt the tension in him building up. The man before him had no sense of perspective. Stan's voice grated as he blurted angrily, "Was bombing the Mollicoat Estate and murdering hundreds of innocent people, including my parents and others I loved—was that in my best interest? Don't you think the government should plead guilty? Inhuman murderers."

The other man seemed shaken by this outburst, although he probably had been expecting something like it. Stan knew that whatever this supposed attorney would say next would be a lie. Indeed, it sounded rehearsed. "Mr. Timmons, I'm aware of your allegations about government abuses. I take them very seriously, and it may be we can find some place during the trial to bring your accusations before the court. I doubt this is the proper venue, because, unfortunately, the government is not on trial, presently. *You* are on trial. The best way to raise these matters

is to admit your own faults, and shall we be honest and say 'sins'? Doesn't your Bible say . . .? Here, I'll read it verbatim." He picked up the Gideon Bible from the bedside stand, flipped straight to the passage in Romans, and read, "'Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.' Don't you admit, Mr. Timmons, that the U.S. government is the 'Government in *Power?*' You call it 'the gip,' right?"

Warren held the Bible over the table and there was a "thump" after he let the Bible drop.

"You should pray about this, Stanley. Eternal damnation. Once you have cleared your conscience and accepted the consequences of your imprudent relationships, then I can help you campaign to investigate the government. There are proper avenues. We are a nation of law. But to mount a campaign, you have to live. We'll talk about this later." He smiled at Stan.

Stan was fatigued by this conversation. "Are you going to lock me to that chain again? I can't put on fresh clothes with my leg chained. And can I have my books and writing notebooks?"

Warren's smiled vanished. He seemed offended. "I'll speak to those in charge of accommodations. Really, I hope you'll trust me." He nodded to the neat pile of clothes and said, "You better change. Hurry. I've got work to do."

Stan rushed into the bathroom and emerged a minute later.

Warren, who had been pacing up and down the room, stepped to the hallway door and beat on it with his fist. The door made the usual mechanical unlocking sounds and swung open.

"You can come back in now," Warren said to the guards. He gave the restraint's lock and key to one of them, who hitched the chain to Stan's other leg this time.

Holding out his hand, Warren looked Stan in the eye, entirely sincere. "See you in the morning?" he asked. Stan took the hand reluctantly. Warren crushed Stan's hand, causing him to grunt in pain. Warren let go and sped out of the room, pounding the floor under his feet and exclaiming to the guards. "Really, men, those masks look so stupid!"

Stan dragged the chain to the bathroom and washed his hands—his right one still aching. He then walked toward the window to try to peek from one of the pin-sized holes in the metal and small gaps at the edges. By chafing his ankle, the chain reminded him that it did not reach the window.

Later in the day, the guards returned, wearing the bandanas, and they hauled out the television.

Warren returned late the next morning. The immense horizontal size of the man confounded accurate memory of him, and Stan was no less astonished than he was at first. Warren brought what he said was a sample confession for Stan to sign, and he set it before him. Stan was sitting at the table.

"Of course, you can change wording you can't agree to in good faith," Warren said. "You may sign this or write your own. Here's a blank sheet of paper."

The sample confession was short and to the point and left out much that Stan had expected to be there. It said all that would be necessary to justify a lethal injection or a hanging, but it inserted trendy phrases incongruous in such a weighty document. Stan pushed it away and said, "I can write a better one. Who wrote this?"

"I did," Warren said, bowing in mock humility. "Consider it a gift."

The English teacher in Stan began editing and marking up the paper—making improvements—and halfway down the page he stopped himself. *What if this was their intention*, he wondered, *to offend my sense of language to tempt me to rewrite the confession, and then they would have my admission and no troublesome trial? Besides, rewriting this trash is foolish.*

He pushed the ready-made confession away. Warren crumpled the document, put the ball in his pocket, shrugged his shoulders under his curly hair, and left the room.

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On the following days, Saturday and Sunday, nothing happened. Stan read the Gideon Bible and did his exercises. Meals were no worse than in his first prison before Ravenell had come—it was fast-food fare and too salty, but the salads were decent.

The supposed trial date arrived, and Stan had not agreed to plea-bargain. Above all, he was convinced they would execute him, with or without the confession. He thought this because the language the tribunal demanded through Warren was untruthful.

If Stan had had the slightest trust in Warren, Warren himself whisked it away. The first confirmation of his unreliability was the mobile trial date. Warren had insisted it would be Monday, but on Monday he said it was firmly set for Wednesday. What followed in the next days was more difficult than any prior experience Stan had had during his incarceration. Wednesday arrived, and no trial. Warren now came every day for as long as four hours, and he talked. He cajoled. He told long fascinating stories about historical figures. He shared his life's story and cried. He quoted the Scriptures. He threatened. More significantly, he asked questions about Stan's life and his friends, wife, children, and family. Stan said little or nothing in response to the tormenting persistence. Not trying to save himself made it easier. In-between and always, Warren came back to the confession. And in all this Stan began to understand Warren's objective. If he got a confession, good, but better was treachery to the Chinook Assembly. Stan knew that a confession would by no means end the interrogation. If he signed a false declaration of guilt, the compromise would not end. Warren would demand more.

Warren began discussing "members of the Assembly" and their fates. Some had been shot; others became witnesses against their fellows. None were people Stan knew. Warren could be lying, or passing lies. Far from being a defense attorney, Warren showed himself to be an investigator, first fishing and later raking for details about "antigovernment conspirators." Warren told how suspects had been subjected to torture and humiliation to extract information, suggesting that Stan could suffer such consequences if he refused to cooperate. After awhile, with a shudder, Stan realized that Warren's stories may have been firsthand accounts.

During this time Warren pulled a piece of paper from his briefcase and waved it in Stan's face. Stan could just make out that it was a copy of Lydia's letter to him. "The government caught her, you know—your girlfriend," Warren said. "Police

caught her up north. It's no good, you holding out, because they know everything now—where you've been hiding and who helped you. They just hope you will share with us in good faith." Stan did not respond because he was certain that Warren was lying. Warren himself seemed to know that his story would not work and he shrugged his shoulders and put the letter away.

But soon enough, a darker side of Warren's nature emerged, as did his true objective, because by the end of the week—Saturday—he marched into the room snarling. The guards came in with him, armed as usual, and for the first time not wearing masks. Stan took this as an ominous sign: They no longer cared about being identified. With Warren also the mask was off. Gone was friendliness. But it was worse: He pulled a pistol out from somewhere, cocked it, and pointed it straight at Stan's head.

"Okay. This is it, *Stan*. To hell with the confession. To hell with a plea-bargain. I want ten names of living people on a piece of paper. NOW! Ten names. People not in jail. Members of your precious conspiracy or . . . not. Ten names. If I don't get them in the next five minutes, I promise you, I'll paint the wall with your brains."

Stan slowly turned his head sideways away from the barrel of the gun, and it seemed that the wall beside him had been abused this way before, and had been repaired.

Shaking with fear and breathing audibly, Stan took up a pen and wrote down the numbers one through ten in the left-hand margin of the page. He wrote down ten names as Warren relaxed and seemed to feel satisfied that he had won this battle. When Stan had written the tenth name, he began adding more numbers and names, filling out the side of the paper. When he reached the bottom he turned the sheet and continued writing numbers and names. Warren attempted to hide his victory smile, but as Stan continued to write, Warren began to suspect Stan had been toying with him. He snatched up the paper and read. What had been a smile turned into a menacing scowl.

"You jackass! At the top. Jesus Christ. Then Moses. Then David, and so on. God of the living, not the dead, I see. And oh, what conceit! You are alongside those heroes of the faith! You are nobody. And look at the rest. I know them all, already.

Your father-in-law. But he is dead, isn't he? Alright. Technically, from your point of view, he is living. Nice joke. This has been fun. I'm going to give you one more chance. Ten names of co-conspirators. No. Make it five. Make it one. One name of a co-conspirator. Wait. I'll make it easier."

Warren set the gun down on the bedside table and opened his briefcase on the bed. He ruffled through it and withdrew a typed list. He put the list on the desk before Stan. "Okay. Put a check mark by one of these names. Just one and I won't kill you. If you refuse, I will redecorate the room. I'll make a fashion statement. You have 60 seconds." He picked up the gun in his right hand and began marking seconds on his watch.

Stan rapidly read down the list. To his astonishment, the names were scores of people he knew from his entire life. There were few persons missing from the list—some childhood friends. Malcolm Williams also was absent, and there were no Hutterites, thankfully, and the North Cascades people were not there, but more striking than absences were people he had not recalled in his intensive memory work in his first cell—the boy in grade school he had hit in the face with a handful of mud; the fellow in high school from whom he had stolen his wallet when it dropped on the floor by Stan's seat. Now he was being forced to betray one of them—one person who would have to face the same treatment he was now enduring. He came to Fr. Schmidt's name and rapidly skimmed to the end of the list. Schmidt was the only person he knew for certain had been involved in the Assembly. Should he mark his name?

The answer was clear, not only because he could not betray his friend, but also because Stan knew that one treachery would lead to another and no end. Stan could see that Warren's words and threats were a strategy to humiliate and rob him of every shred of dignity. Who knew, but if Stan broke down and checked off one name, Warren might be able to pressure him to check all of them eventually, and then Stan would be shot anyway. If he thought betraying one person might deliver him, he would be tempted. As it stood in reality, the decision was easy.

He mumbled something, and Warren had to ask him to repeat what he said.

"May I have another piece of paper? The person I'm thinking of is not on the list."

"Alright! Now you're talking. Oh. Bad pun." Warren put the gun down again and carefully removed a blank sheet from his briefcase. He seemed to have an endless supply. While he did this, Stan folded the list of names and dropped it into the wastebasket. Warren set the blank paper in front of Stan and gingerly picked up his gun and pointed it at Stan's head again.

"Write. One name. No games."

Stan wrote the number one and followed with a name. Warren leaned over to see what Stan had put down. He saw what it was at the exact moment Stan asked, "Is your last name Warren, or your first?"

Warren sniffed in a deep breath and spat a one-word curse. He said nothing more, but unhurriedly switched the gun from his right hand to his left and pointed the gun at the ceiling. He swung back his right arm and delivered a forceful slap across the side of Stan's face. This man, with all his girth and pampered appearance, was not soft: he was a weightlifter and strong. He followed through on the slap so that it was not a mere glancing blow, and Stan pitched from the seat and hit his head against the wall. The chair fell over, following him. Warren uncocked the gun and stomped from the room, muttering, "I'll see you in court, Stan. I'm still your damned attorney."

The guards chased after Warren, grinning foolishly, and slammed the door. Stan lay still until his head stopped spinning. He got up, sat on the side of the bed, and felt his smarting, swelling face. Only bruised, he had survived this fight, but what would be next? He did not think he could withstand outright physical torture.

† † †

The next morning, the guards noisily rousted him up. They bristled with impatience, and after unlocking his leg iron, they ordered him to shower and change into a fresh uniform. "You're moving" was all Stan could elicit.

In the bathroom mirror Stan, inspected the dark blotches on the left side of his face. The flesh was tender and his eye puffy. His jaw hurt most of all. No sooner had he turned on the shower

than they banged on the door, yelling "Quickly!" Stan did not think they wanted to rush as much as to befuddle him. He washed efficiently, but he refused to hurry. He dressed inside the steamy bathroom and ran his mind over what he should take. This was not an arduous task, since he had practically nothing—only the Gideon Bible and his watch, which sat on the bedside, and the list of names that he had recovered from the trashcan. He could use the list to pray.

A guard beat on the door again, and Stan yelled back, "Just a minute!" He buttoned up the new jumpsuit, combed his hair with his fingers, and opened the door saying, "Let me collect a few things." The guards did not seem to care, and Stan picked up the items he wanted, pulled on the provided slippers, and walked to the door.

"Wait," he said, "I have one request. May I look out the window? Through the cracks? Just once?"

One of the guards shook his head and grunted *no*. He held up a blindfold and said, "Turn around." He tied the blindfold, cuffed Stan's hands in front, and led him out the door.

Stan tried to follow the permutations of turns to orient the relationship between his hotel and his coming destination, but he soon lost track. The windows of the vehicle were open: the breath of air Stan had learned to expect and depend upon—this was literal today. The day was sunny, muted by the shadows of fall and morning mists blowing in from the ocean. Stan could not see, but light penetrated the blindfold, and the air was cool and damp. He absorbed the sounds and smells, and tried to imagine the visual world around him. From the crowd of disparate clues, he guessed he was in a small town, one that had an interstate highway nearby, which explained the hotel in which he had been kept a prisoner. Stops and starts were explained by traffic lights. The car flowed sedately along, not in a hurry, and at last turned a corner, slowed, and came to a stop. Echoing walls now loomed up on both sides of the car. He was in an alley, and guards opened the door and drew him outside. The ride had been short. Would they kill him now in this alleyway?

They removed the handcuffs, chained his legs together, and pushed him along through a door. A hallway led to another doorway and this into a room dim and cavernous, smelling of

sour sweat and bad air. Once inside, they removed the blindfold. Stan looked all around. It was a huge concert hall with no windows, and Stan had been brought in by a side exit. There was an elevated platform on his right and an array of stage lights beaming down upon a long table on the platform. Three men sat at the table with piles and boxes of folders. Below the platform, in a flat space normally an orchestra pit, were two more long tables. Men and women in suits, and some dressed in collared, long-sleeve shirts, milled around the tables and conferred. Armed guards in military uniforms stood at intervals around the perimeter of the room. One of the guards moved forward and pulled Stan along. The guard sat him in the front row of auditorium seats with a wide space between him and the left-hand table, which had additional guards posted nearby.

Seated and secure, Stan had leisure to observe the scene more closely. Enormous blank television screens hung in each of the room's upper front corners. He now noticed flowing curly locks and Warren's oversized backside over a padded mobile chair at the table in front of him. Warren held a telephone to his ear and swiveled around. Catching Stan's eye, he winked and resumed attending to his telephone exchange. Stan looked away in disgust. He guessed that a trial of another prisoner had just ended and his was about to begin. Time dragged along and nothing seemed to be happening. The immense room was mostly empty, but there were ceaseless migrations and movements of people. The air was hot and stuffy. Sweating, Stan closed his eyes and held as still as he could until he began to doze.

"Stanley Pierce Timmons," an empty voice called from the front. Stan woke and stood, disoriented from momentary unconsciousness. Warren motioned for Stan to come forward and he pulled a chair out for him. When Stan got near, Warren winced at seeing his bruised face. Stan maneuvered around in his manacles and took the chair. The guards stepped up behind them. Warren leaned over and whispered in Stan's ear, "Sorry, buddy, about the threats and the slap. They forced me. I had to give them a show."

Stan did not know if he should believe Warren, but he couldn't imagine why the man should lie now, except to pacify him. But

it didn't matter; Stan was alone in this battle. He had been calm up until this moment, but depression and tension crept up and he felt his mind losing the ability to concentrate.

The members of the three-man panel repeatedly peered down at Stan while they passed documents and read them silently. Stan leaned toward Warren and whispered, "When will the trial begin?"

"It's already started."

"When will I get a chance to speak?"

"Never."

"What kind of court is this?"

"A kangaroo court."

"Why isn't it being held in a courtroom?"

"Good question. This is a former church building."

"A church?"

"A contemporary one."

"What happened to the people—the church?"

"Damn. I don't know. It died. The members ran off into the woods. I don't live in this town."

Stan took a moment to consider this information and then resumed his questioning.

"What if I start shouting?"

"Waste of breath, and the hearing will be over. They'll haul you out of here."

"Won't the press take note? Won't publicity help me?"

"Press? Don't be a boob. This is a secret trial. The government will issue press releases saying you plead guilty."

"But I haven't pleaded guilty."

"You haven't?"

"What do you mean?"

Warren did not answer. A steady stream of people approached and withdrew from the tribunal's table, delaying progress. The tribunal seemed mired in inertia. Suddenly, a dam of tension broke and the jurists up front relaxed.

Stan leaned over to Warren and whispered, "What are they doing?"

"Examining evidence, and . . . and this." Warren slid a paper before Stan. It was a copy of the confession Warren had written, incorporating the corrections and changes Stan had scribbled.

There, below the text, was Stan's signature. Or a good imitation. The bugger Warren had forged his signature!

Stan jumped up and shouted, "Your Honor!"

A guard hit him in the back with his rifle butt, not hard enough to break a bone, but Stan did sit down, bruised and aching.

Warren whispered angrily, "Damn it! Listen; don't call them Your Honors. They're not judges, but drafted civilian magistrates. All the real judges in this district and everyone official refused to sit on this case. They're afraid. There've been assassinations. Don't resent the confession. I might have saved your life."

"You've said that before."

"Don't get your hopes up. I said 'might.' The verdict's predetermined. The only part we don't know is the sentence. Life or death. We should have that in a few minutes. Be patient."

A man wearing olive safari shorts and a bright red and orange silk shirt with green palm trees strode up the central aisle and handed the central panel member a note. The oddly clothed man stood by while the other scribbled a response. Stan's eyes wandered. Other prisoners and their personal guards waited in units clustered behind him on the main floor of the immense inside space. Stan noticed the banners from the former usage of the building hanging from the walls. The supplicant in informal leisure clothes walked smartly out.

Stan looked up to the men in front. The central man of the tribunal finished reading documents and whispering with the others. He held up his head and said, "Will counsel approach the bench?" A neatly dressed man from the right-hand table—a prosecutor, supposedly—met Warren before the members of the panel. They talked in low tones. Stan strained to hear their conversation.

Warren was arguing, "I'm telling you, he's more valuable to you alive!"

The central panel member took a seal, inked it, and stamped a sheet of paper. One of the other panel members motioned for a guard to come up. The guard glared at Warren, who turned to walk back to Stan's table. His shoulders slumping, Warren took several steps, made eye contact with Stan, shook his head, and

his curls waved back and forth. He subtly drew a finger across his throat and mouthed, "Sorry."

No feeling or opinion came to Stan regarding the death sentence. The reason was that he thought they had inflicted the sentence summarily by shooting him in the head. When Warren had gestured and his mouth had moved, a roar instantly deafened Stan. He felt an omnipotent pressure against his face and body, and his hair jerked. The hairs of his eyebrows yanked. He knew he was dead and he screamed involuntarily, but this made no sound. Concrete pieces like shrapnel zinged by. That same instant, Warren, with arms rising over his head, flew the remaining distance between him and Stan, flipped over the table, slammed into Stan, and crushed him into his chair, which toppled backwards. Stan's head smacked the floor. Warren was on top of him, smothering him. The air of the room swelled with roiling dust. A television screen came crashing down. Chunks of belated debris fell all around. Stan gasped shallowly and choked—his breath had been knocked out. When he regained his breathing after an impossibly long half minute, it hurt horribly and he was still being crushed. He tried to push Warren off, but pain in his right arm seared his brain. Warren's hair covered Stan's face. Stan remained on his back, pinned for a whole minute more, panting, feeling the pain diminish, gathering wits and strength. A high-pitched whistle shrieked in his head. He felt Warren's abundant warm blood soaking through his jumpsuit. Horrified, he squirmed out on his back.

Beams of light poured in at an angle through a gaping hole in the wall behind the raised platform. He struggled to his feet, his right arm hanging, throbbing. There was a sharp pain at a specific place at the side of his chest. Warren's body lay facedown at Stan's feet. He knelt and reached out to check for life signs, but burning pain in his arm paralyzed him again. Once the pain subsided, Stan stood up wobbling; he staggered, grabbed hold of the upended table leg, and gazed around the room. Warren surely was dead. The bomb's explosion appeared to have left no one ambulatory, or even conscious—no one but Stan. Pieces, limbs, and headless torsos of dirty human bodies lay amidst the rubble, which was not quite at rest.

Weakness and dizziness overcame him, and he sat suddenly on the floor, jarring his shoulder—pain seized him again. Dark clad human figures glided around the edge of the room. A single gunshot cracked. Over the ringing in Stan's ears, a voice boomed—a voice familiar, bearing a note of sarcasm.

"Is anyone alive in here?"

Stan did not answer. No one answered.

"Is anyone alive?" the voice repeated. There was silence.

"Shit!" the voice barked, and the sound reverberated through the sepulchral space. "The firking charge was too big. We killed everyone. There's blood all over the floor."

Stan mustered the will to call weakly, "Hey . . . over here."

Crunching steps approached and strong hands gently lifted Stan up by his armpits.

"It's him. It's Stan Timmons. Thank God!" the voice before him exclaimed.

Stan lifted his head and brought his eyes to focus on the bearer of this voice. Without his eyeglasses, which had been knocked from his face, he could not be sure who this was. His hearing had begun to return, though it remained impaired.

"Tommy . . . Duckwitz?"

"Yes. I am he. Let's go. We have to hurry."

Automatic weapons slung over their shoulders, the men holding Stan began to move him toward the brightness.

"Stop," Stan said. "Where are we going?"

"We're rescuing you," Tommy said. To the men he said, "Let's go."

Stan let his feet drag and he repeated, "Stop!" The men halted and let go of his arms. Stan sank to the floor. "Wait a minute. Let me think. You came to rescue me?"

"We don't have time for discussion."

Stan coughed, and suddenly it was like the wind had been knocked out of him again. He breathed shallowly, rapidly, in excruciating pain.

"You have a fractured rib," Tommy said dispassionately. "Your lung's not collapsed. That's good."

Before Stan's pain weakened, he gasped, "Did you kill Talus Schenk?"

"No. He committed suicide. Like every corpse here. They put themselves in the way."

"You . . . you did this?" Stan said, waving his unhurt arm in a circle.

"The charge was too big. We meant to stun the guards and create a distraction. This was unintentional."

"But look. How many . . . dead! Prisoners. You almost killed me. I . . . I'm not going with you. Your method . . . you are indis … criminate— and . . . brutish."

Tommy flared in violent anger. "You don't want to come!? The trouble we went to! Pick him up."

"No!" Stan shouted the best he could. "You can't!"

Tommy paused for a fraction of a second while he decided, and then he said, "Our time is gone. Okay. You haven't changed. Still your own man. They'll kill you. They will kill you."

"But, Tommy, why wouldn't you come with me in Salt Lake? Why didn't you come back?"

"Stan, I'm leaving. I'll tell you something, though. Your wife. Mindy. I was with her when she was killed. She was faithful to you. I wanted her, but she was loyal. You're wondering how she escaped from her captors. The sky is clear in Colorado; I saw the Milky Way! It was so beautiful. She *butchered* them in the mountains of Colorado. We met and looked for you. In the North Cascades."

Stan desperately wanted to hear more of this story, but Tommy motioned to the men and said, "We have others to rescue," and they bounded toward the bright gaping hole. There was a loud whistle and other figures followed them. Stan stood up and again held onto a leg of the upturned table. Through the cloud of lingering dust, he watched them vacate the room.

The present time stretched out indefinitely and nothing happened. Stan remained still—every move and every breath hurt. Then there was a second powerful explosion nearby. The floor shook, and another piece of ceiling plummeted to the floor. A fire burned at the bottom of one of the banners and smoke clouded the air. Bodies stirred uselessly in feeble death throes. His feet chained, Stan laboriously picked his way across the arena-size room away from the danger and the blinding sun rays.

He progressed toward the exits in the back of the auditorium. With his good arm, he pushed out one of the unlocked doors and found himself in a wide, glass-fronted reception area. A massive sculpture of a hollow globe stood in the middle of this space: the continents of the earth welded into a shell. This part of the building was undamaged and had been evacuated. He sat on a padded bench for a few minutes to allow his eyes to become accustomed to the natural light. He shuffled to one of the exterior doors and looked through the window. His soul feasted on luminescent shrubbery, trees, and blue sky and clouds lying above an expanse of asphalt. He shoved a door open, walked out a few feet, and heard faint shouting.

Partly concealed by a green berm, a knot of people huddled at the distant end of the parking lot. A white vehicle—a prison transport—sped from that direction and stopped next to him. Armed men jumped out, opened a rear door in the vehicle, and ordered Stan inside. He tried to lift his leg to the step, but the shackles prevented him. The men beside him hoisted him roughly causing him to grunt fiercely in pain, shoved him inside, slammed the door, and the truck roared away with paper litter swirling in its wake. Stan stumbled forward onto an empty place on a bench that lined the walls of the box. The transport truck was full of prisoners.

A fellow next to Stan tapped him on the knee and said, "Let me see your arm."

Stan had been holding this right arm with his left hand, and replied, "It's not bleeding."

"That's some bruise on your face. Were you near the explosion?"

"Yes, but I'll live," Stan said and closed his eyes.

"Well, anyone up for escaping?" This man sitting next to Stan cheerfully looked around the compartment waiting for an answer. Someone moaned. Someone else laughed. Two of the men raised their hands.

"Good. Let's generate an opportunity. What about you?" He tapped Stan's knee again.

"Maybe. I volunteered for prison."

"You did?"

A thin, older man with gray hair, his hands resting on his thighs, said from across the compartment, "I believe we all are political prisoners here. What were the charges against you all? Mine was sedition."

The other dozen men confirmed that their "crimes" were political, most either of attempting or advocating the overthrow of the government, or of tax evasion. One had been convicted of trumped-up charges of giving false information. Stan was the only person who had been charged additionally with common crimes, but he kept this information to himself. The discussion cycled briefly around how many of the men had been arrested for activity that had until recently been considered legal under the First Amendment. The gray-haired man, as Stan recognized, was a prominent newspaper publisher in Portland. He had been arrested for criticizing the government. Another man said he was an attorney who worked with an international human rights organization. He had turned his ire toward his own country. Once the prisoners shared their biographies, the elderly gray-haired man asked about their sentences. Fifteen years. Twenty-five years. Life. Stan's had been the only death sentence, but he answered truthfully when he said, "The bomb blew before the tribunal pronounced its sentence."

The knee tapper asked Stan, "Were you inside the courtroom when it exploded?"

Stan felt sick to his stomach and dizzy, and didn't wish to talk, but he affirmed this and described the scene, telling about Tommy and the rescue attempt.

The other men uttered expressions of awe.

"We didn't see any rescuers," Knee Tapper said. "I wish we had. Our trials were conducted before yours. We *convicts* were led to a room to await transportation to a special new federal prison. The bomb didn't impact us directly, but when it went off, the guards took us outside and loaded us into this truck. They began clearing the entire complex for fear of a follow-up bomb. It was a confused mess. I guess the supervisors had been killed or injured in the blast."

"Some prisoners must have gotten away. There are several missing," the gray-haired man said.

"Killed by the blast," Stan said moodily. "If they were in the auditorium, they're probably dead, or critically wounded."

"But some got away," the gray-haired man insisted.

Stan let the matter drop. At his request, the men made space for him to lie on the floor. As they traveled, his heart became light, because his life was over. Confronted with the probability of immediate death, he accepted it again, as he had during his journey home from the Hutterites, except for an innate fear of pain and nothingness, which seemed easy to manage. There was no more to accomplish, and no hope for survival. He knew this when he submitted himself to arrest at the abortion site. Besides, now he was lethargic from weariness and pain.

The truck rolled along. The men needed to urinate, and one of them banged the window to the cab with his fist and shouted. They were discussing what corner to use when the truck switched to an offramp and decelerated, coming to a stop along the roadside. The door opened, and facing them was a short-barreled shotgun. There were only two guards, including the driver, who held a leveled pistol. Stan hobbled along. The prisoners, all in shackles, lined up against a guardrail that overlooked a steep bank. At the bottom of the bank was a barbed-wire fence circling a field, and beyond, woods, a creek, a low-arched bridge, and blue hills behind them all—a scene to make a lovely painting. Tall grass and weeds covered the bank.

"Okay, get back in!" shouted the driver.

When Stan came up to be loaded inside, the driver pulled him away, saying, "Not you."

Once the other prisoners were safely locked inside, the driver ordered Stan back to the guardrail.

"Climb over."

Stan had to sit on the guardrail and swing his bound legs over. His arm and rib hurt as he did so. Clumsily, he rose to his feet, and the driver raised his pistol to Stan's head. Stan closed his eyes and prayed, expecting his end at any instant.

"Derek! What in hell are you doing?" the guard with the shotgun shouted to the driver.

Derek glanced to the other guard and back to Stan. "I was told to shoot this one."

"You can't. Damn it, we are not executioners! Who gave this order?"

"Someone with power."

"Who?" the other demanded.

Derek lowered the pistol. "The court director. Garmin. He said if anything screwed up with the trials today, this prisoner should be shot."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Don't even know his name."

"Listen, you can't do this. I'll have you and Garmin brought up on murder charges. We're supposed to deliver them to the Brogan prison."

"Garmin was killed in the attack. This—is—a—terrorist."

The driver raised the pistol to Stan's head again and tensed. The hammer was back. Stan hunched, and the other guard swung his shotgun toward Derek's side and pulled the trigger. Derek cartwheeled over the guardrail and flopped down the hill. His pistol had hit the ground and discharged. Stan collapsed onto the gravel and slid down the hill a little, undamaged, but deafened, shaken, and hurting again. The guard walked to the edge of the bank and looked over the guardrail. Bottles, cans, and plastic bags. There was no motion or sounds—the brown weeds and grass hid Derek's body. The guard put down the shotgun, helped Stan up and back over the guardrail, and walked him to the truck. He picked up the shotgun again and held it against his hip, muzzle up.

When he unlocked the back door with one hand, the door swung out with force, slamming the guard against the back of the truck, and prisoners tumbled out. Stan was knocked down, and the guard slipped to the ground. The escaping prisoners climbed or rolled over the guardrail and disappeared down the bank. The guard regained his feet, grabbed the shotgun and jumped to where he could see the escapees easing through the fence below. He stood there blinking, shifted a tobacco wad in his mouth, spat, and turned to help Stan up again.

"To hell with them," the guard said. "I'm not killing anyone else today."

He picked up the pistol from the grass, scrutinized it, and tucked it into his belt. He looked out over the field and said,

"God, what have I done?—I just met the guy. Derek . . . Damn it!" The guard's face contorted. "I'll . . . The prisoners overpowered me. Stole the shotgun. They killed the driver, right? But . . . I need to lose the shotgun."

Stan said nothing, and the guard locked him in with the remaining prisoners and drove on. The gray, elderly man, resting his elbows on his knees, gazed at Stan, who appeared unchanged by the second near-fatal experience of the day. The elderly man asked, "What all happened out there?" Stan shook his head, and the elderly man said, wonderingly, "There's something unusual about you."

Wanting to change the subject, Stan asked, "Do you know the man who led the escape?"

The man laughed. "Didn't you recognize him? He's a congressman, or was. A decorated war veteran."

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By the sweeping brown landscape, and the position of the sun, the prisoners looking from the tiny windows guessed that they were traveling east. The journey seemed interminable, and they all became thirsty and hungry. The new driver, now alone up front, apparently would not risk another stop, except when he disposed of the shotgun deep in a culvert under a side road.

The gray-haired man said to everyone, "I don't believe that our captors had the wherewithal in the confusion to have placed a stool pigeon among us, but I caution you nevertheless. Be careful what you say here."

Stan assumed that nothing he could say about himself would be damaging, since he already was under a death sentence, and he did most of the talking. When evening came, and they continued to roll along the road, he was still calmly narrating his story, including what he felt safe to tell about the Assembly and people who helped him along the way.

The other men listened, enthralled.

*Sudden joy overtakes me as I walk down a hillside in an open huckleberry country. For fun I begin running, and I am amazed at how good it feels. I do not stumble because the ground is smooth under the grass. Ahead, before a line of trees, I see a dark brownish animal cutting from left to right and I think it is a deer, but it has a long tail flying behind. It's a wolf. Another wolf joins it, and they prance in circles, heads down, noses to the ground, as if they are tracking rodents. I sink into the grass to watch with fascination, since I have never before seen wolves in the wild. I feel free and happy, and it comes to me why this is so. I'm enjoying the wilderness and being alone, knowing that when I go home, my family will be there waiting for me.*

**–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons**

***Around an abortion site in Memphis, TN.***

## Chapter 27
# Prison in Prison

It was late night and silent except for sounds that were very near or from far away. The prison compound coldly glowed—a rectangular island of orangish light in a sea of shadowy darkness. Imposing concrete buildings, like cliffs, stood motionless at the center. No trees softened the harsh lines; the only plants on the island comprised an irrigated grass lawn, gray colored. A double line of fences circled the island; razor wire coiled along the fence tops, poised to bite and rip living flesh. Twin towers balanced each other from opposing corners of the compound. Men in the towers, their blanched faces dimly illuminated by lights of surveillance and alarm equipment, hunched over, watching through the glass. They sipped at cups of strong coffee. Two four-wheel diesel patrol vehicles circled in opposite directions outside the fence on a continuous asphalt track. When the vehicles met, they stopped so the drivers could converse window to window. A call from a tower sent them in motion again around the perimeter, but now arranged to travel in the same direction, evenly spaced apart.

A breeze rippled the dry grass in the rolling rangeland surrounding this island city of confined humanity. Inside the buildings, day by day, nearly 2,000 souls paced, read, watched, prayed, suffered, sinned, celebrated, schemed, or grumbled; and at this hour, most slept on their pads, and some sleepers dreamed. Some snored. Beyond the camp to the east, high sagebrush stirred uneasily under the pale starlight. The moon was well below the western horizon. A mournful chord of a train whistle cried to any unslumbering persons in the desolated scattered farmhouses—any who stared from their beds with their windows partly open. The train engine rumbled. Deer browsed and cattle ruminated, a nearby dog barked. A single truck with a box compartment on its back rolled along the road approaching the prison camp's front gate. The truck headlights shone ahead,

and its taillights lit up with a ruby radiance. The truck passed inside the gate. A line of special operations prison guards filed from a building.

The truck's compartment door opened and the new prisoners welcomed climbing into the night air in the glare of the bright camp courtyard. The half circle of heavily armored guards, guns readied, wearing riot helmets and carrying clubs, greeted them stoically; some guards shifted their weight from foot to foot, itching for a fight. The driver had alerted them by radio that escapees from this transport had killed the previous driver. The prisoners were required to wait for someone to collect a power saw from the shop to release their legs because the driver who brought them knew nothing about a key for the shackles. This noisy cutting process took an hour, and the guards kept all the prisoners together outside in the cold. After this, they were escorted to an intake room where they were given water and sandwiches. Since it was late, the men were, for the present, spared the indoctrination seminar for new prisoners; they were ordered to strip, personal items in their pockets were inspected and confiscated, and they were given clean, blue prison outfits and led to a shower room. Once all were dressed, they were locked together in a secure room designed for the utmost discomfort for residents and maximal convenience for processing large numbers of people. A commode sat in the corner, but there was only painted concrete to sleep on and no blankets. There was no guard in the room.

Stan curled up on the floor near a wall, using his slippers for a pillow, while the other men sat in a circle in the middle of the room; led by the gray-haired man, they quietly discussed means of resistance and noncooperation within the prison. So weary from the stupefying day, Stan slept hard, but the floor hurt his shoulder and ribs when he tried to shift positions, and he woke up. He heard the whispering again. The sound was restful and soothing and reminded him of his parents talking in bed in the morning when he was a child. He was about to drop off again when someone rudely shook him.

"Hey, wake up. You need to hear this."

Moaning, his mind in a fog, Stan dragged himself to the circle in the center of the room.

"We want you to join us. Rather, we want to join you," the gray-haired man said, his whisper now barely audible. "We have been discussing. I think, Sta . . . , sir, the prison doesn't know who you are. Your identity records didn't come with us, and possibly your prosecutors were killed in the bombing yesterday. If they knew who you were, you'd be pulled from the group. But that's only a guess. It's obvious the government is arresting profuse numbers of people, and all our records may have been misplaced. You've been isolated for over a year, and you probably don't know that a guerilla war against the government has been taking place. The bombing yesterday was one of many such occurrences. The government has lost control of segments of society and can hardly keep up with what it does control. We've decided to protect you because of your affiliation with a legitimate rebellion against the present government. All of us decided that we wouldn't give our names to prison officials. This way you can remain silent and not bring attention to yourself. If you are under a death sentence, this might save you."

"Won't they just have electronic records?" Stan asked.

"Oh," the gray-haired man said. "Of course, you wouldn't have heard this. The government suffered a devastating electronic attack about three weeks ago. Their main computer systems were crippled. No doubt they had backups, but rumor has it that even those were damaged. Eventually, they probably will piece together information from individual hard drives kept by clerks around the Northwest and elsewhere. From what I could see at the trial location, our records—fingerprints, photographs, DNA data, and the like—were being kept in cardboard boxes."

"I see," Stan said, sounding dubious.

"Anyway," the gray-haired man said, "we have pledged to refuse cooperation with the prison and to not give our identities, whatever the consequences." All of the men indicated their assent either by voice or motion.

Stan was moved by this outpouring of commitment from people he scarcely knew—other "convicted criminals" like himself, but he did not understand why he should engender this support. Who was he? He had never done anything out of the

ordinary. He was no hero. In any circumstance, he had mostly done only what any other human being would have done, or should have done, and he acted in self-preservation or self-interest, either of body or soul. The same self-regard, as in embarrassment, prevented him from asking these men why they revered or respected him, and from telling them that they shouldn't. Instead, he asked, "How could they lose my records—the boxes?"

"After the bombing we were rapidly collected and hauled away," said the gray-haired man. "Except for you, I don't think the government has the resources to care about our individual cases. We're dangerous dissidents to be segregated from society; this is all that matters. I think you might have been gathered up with us by mistake. The bomb, as you said, killed or seriously injured everyone but you in the auditorium; likely your records were destroyed or mislaid in the destruction."

"Blown up or burned," Stan said.

"They could have been stolen. The bombing was not only a terrorism act by revolutionaries, but a rescue attempt. When they finish uncovering bodies and don't find yours, they might assume that you escaped with the bombers. This is all speculation. We shall soon find out."

A thought came to Stan. While he had no confidence in himself as a leader, he did have an idea that might be useful. He did not arrange this with Lydia, but he could use the idea here. "Since we won't use our real names," he said, "shouldn't we give ourselves jail names for communication and recognition?"

The men agreed, and the discussion changed into a brainstorming session. Stan suggested that the gray-haired man be "Grey," and the man laughed, saying, "Keeps it simple."

When they came to Stan, the men had no ideas. Grey said, "Help us . . . sir."

"A man I met gave me a name meaning 'fool's gold,' but after we had spent time together, he said I was 'real.' The atomic symbol for gold is AU. Hmm. How about A.U. for a name?"

"Hey you!" said the human rights lawyer who had taken the name Auspy, for Auspicious.

"What?" Stan asked.

"How about 'Hey You' for a name?"

Stan stared through the lawyer as he thought. The designation was different and egalitarian and might prove advantageous by way of confusing enemies. "Okay. I accept."

The men began discussing further strategies for communication and organizing resistance. Stan listened awhile before saying that he had read memoirs of numerous prisoners. "None of those writers experienced the current penal system, and from a practical standpoint none of their ideas might work."

However, he brought out the principles behind their ideas and said, "We need to develop applications to fit the circumstances."

He went on to emphasize personal discipline and integrity, and a hopeful outlook. He urged the men not to dwell upon what they had lost from their former lives, but rather to plan for the future when they would be free again. And then, on the other hand, because they might never be released, they must become free on the inside of these walls, free in their hearts.

And now thoughts came to him from reading of years ago—from when he first set his foot upon this adventure—when he attended a book discussion at the Sterne home. He did not recall quotes but remembered the idea, which he presented: "In a land that's a prison, only in prison will you be free. In other words, our country is becoming a colossal prison and only those in the prisons of this nation are truly free. A prison in prison is a double negative. The negatives cancel one another and transform into a positive. We here have little more to lose, and this makes us strong in what matters most. In our freedom on the outside, we spoke and lived what was true, and landed here. This is our reward, and we should be thankful. Don't laugh. Those outside who continue to fear are the true slaves. You must find a purpose for your lives while in prison."

"I find your words encouraging," Auspy said.

"Here's a communication tool that might help us," Stan said, continuing. "A tap code used by American POWs in North Vietnam. They became so good at it, they could carry on extensive conversations, tapping and interpreting fast. They would conduct virtual birthday parties with imaginary cake, candles, and presents. They'd send messages, prisoner to prisoner, through a row of cages. At least it kept up morale. Since the letters C and K are often interchangeable, eliminate K

and have C serve in its place. That makes 25 letters. Imagine a grid, five letters by five letters, with A, B, C, D, E across the top row and then F, G, H, I, and J on the second. Remember to skip K and begin with L on the third line and continue this way on to the end of the alphabet. That's the grid. Like Bingo. Start by finding the horizontal plane—count down and then over. Let me give an example. The letter J."

Stan tapped twice, paused, and tapped five times.

"Two taps takes you down to the second row, and five taps over to the letter J. Always start by moving down the grid and then over. Make a longer pause between words. I think everyone should learn this, practice it, and teach it to others. It might be useful. Oh, and you can use any sound for the sequence—coughing or sweeping a broom. Not only tapping."

The other men asked questions to be sure they understood the system. When Stan's tap code explanation was done, they contributed similar thoughts and asked where this all might lead, but they were not allowed to discuss any further, because doors opened in two ends of the room simultaneously, a half-dozen guards entered through each door, and the prisoners realized they had remained awake all through the night and it was morning.

The prisoners grew silent and waited expectantly; guards stood at the ready in a line.

"Stay on the floor," one of the guards ordered, and in walked a figure, a woman, who commanded everyone's attention. She was dressed in a dark-blue business suit, the side-slitted skirt coming to mid-calf, and she herself seemed entirely businesslike, except for an ever-so-slight feminine sway in her gait. She stopped in front of the men and began speaking. The prisoners hung on her words not only because of their import, but because the woman—who was younger than thirty—like a local television newscaster, habitually added extra movements to her facial expressions and tones to her voice that were cute and sexy to the men. Obviously, she intended to appear strong and authoritarian for this occasion, but she was not successful in concealing her femininity. She appeared to be relaxed and confident in her role, but somewhat nervous in her person. For many of the men, having reddish hair did not help her authority.

"Welcome to Brogan Federal Correctional Camp," she said. "My name is Ms. Mercer DeLeon, and I will be your case manager. Please hand this clipboard around, and I want you each to write down your name, age, Social Security number, and birthplace. Next are copies of a brochure containing prison rules. Read the rules carefully and sign at the bottom, acknowledging that you received them. We will be conducting intake interviews presently, one person at a time, and then each of you will be given a complete physical examination." One of the prisoners made an airy whistle at this, and another prisoner mashed the whistler's hand that was flat on the floor.

"I have one more item for your attention," she said, ignoring the disturbance. "The health form. If you will complete the form about your medical history, it will save time later on. We hope you will soon and smoothly be integrated into our community."

With no further words, she turned and walked to the door by which she entered. The guards remained where they were.

"What about breakfast?" Grey called out behind her. She halted, returned, and conferred with one guard, and said, "You'll have breakfast after processing. We'll be giving you cholesterol tests, and you have to fast for this test." She marched from the room and all the men watched her while the whistler counted each step under his breath.

The prisoners met each other's eyes, confirming their commitment to resist, and trying without speaking to ask and answer questions. Holding the clipboard, Grey said quietly, but for everyone to hear, "If you have a special medical need, put it down. If you write too much information, it might identify you. The prison is better organized than I thought, but this shouldn't alter our plan."

They circulated the clipboard. Stan changed his mind about what to put down, as he thought that the initials A.U. would be a better official alias, and he passed this information around. The last prisoner, who was Auspy, held up the clipboard to be taken. The guard who received it, and who seemed to have rank above the other guards, read down the list. Displeasure spread all over his face. Through his frown he said, "This is bullcrap. Write

down your real names." He gave the clipboard back to Auspy, who set it on the floor and scooted away a few feet.

The guard stared coolly into Auspy's eyes and picked up the clipboard. He backed away and said in a voice that tried to seem casual, "You'll see; there are consequences for insubordination. We will discuss this in your interviews." He gave the clipboard to another guard, who carried it through the door leading to the inner offices. The men quietly read the rules and jotted their jail names where their signatures should go, and they began filling out the medical forms. Before long, the first prisoner was called.

When Stan's turn came, the prison personnel in the interview room appeared to be stressed by interrogating those who had gone before him. Ms. DeLeon sat behind a table and kept shifting in her seat. A nameless male administrator kept standing up and sitting down. He made a perfunctory effort to persuade Stan to give his name and other information, but, based on his experience so far this morning, he did not expect Stan to yield. Stan was relieved that Grey's intuition had been correct. They had no idea who he was.

The woman DeLeon attempted to find out. "Mr. A.U. Are those your initials? Well, Mr. A.U., let me tell you my concern. I don't know what your crime was. You might be a serial killer or child molester. You could help yourself and us by telling us who you are. If your crime is of a lesser nature, we could keep you at the medium-level security. If I don't know, then you will be confined in maximum. We are just figuring out that your group has decided to be non-cooperative, and I don't understand why. We're trying to make the best of a confusing situation."

Ms. DeLeon stopped, apparently having concluded her formal appeal. But perhaps something in Stan encouraged her to appeal on a personal basis, and the nameless administrator glared at her when she said, "This is not the first occasion when prisoners have been dumped on us, Mr. A.U. I was on the phone all night trying to find out where you came from. All I know is, the prisoners who escaped from the truck killed the driver, if that story is true. It's very scary. The guard who brought you didn't identify himself. He dropped you and got away. We have no idea where he came from. Somewhere in Oregon, and the video cameras did not catch his license plate number. I can't

understand this level of incompetence. I'm trying to do my job, and you are making it harder."

DeLeon ceased talking, and Stan noticed with surprise that she verged on tears. She took a deep breath and composed herself.

The administrator said without emotion, except for feint of friendliness, "One last chance, Mr. A.U. Tell us your name, the crimes of which you were convicted, your sentence, and the other information we require, or we will be compelled to keep you in our super-maximum care."

Stan looked down and said, "I'm sorry."

A guard escorted him down a hallway for the medical examination. He checked out fine, except for his eyesight, which had gotten worse since he last had his eyes tested, his ribs, for which they could do nothing, and his shoulder, which might have a muscular tear. The doctor gave him a cortisone shot and said to keep using it, even if it hurt. Stan asked if he might receive glasses, and the physician's assistant made a note. The blood analysis would take a few days to return, he said. Next, the guard led him through a complex sequence of turnings, corridors, and stairways of concrete and iron. Finally, they came to a steel door in a row of identical doors.

The guard unlocked the door with a card key and said, "Here's your hole, until you talk."

Stan entered the tiny room, and the door slammed, ringing behind him.

† † †

Again, Stan lost track of time, and now no meals helped him measure the day, because no one brought any. The sink gave him water. Night and day ceased to exist. Again, he could not distinguish north, south, east, or west. Every so often, a note fell from the food slot telling him that he could eat when he was ready to give his name. Stan refolded the paper and pushed it back into the corridor. None of his personal items were given him, and so he prayed, and thought, and exercised in the tiny cell. He washed without soap and he slept. His stomach growled until, apart from a little water absorption, it stopped functioning. He tried the tap code on the walls and received no reply. One night he woke drenched in sweat and feeling ill, as

he supposed, because his body had begun converting fat. He grew weak and stopped exercising. Thanksgiving Day came along without his knowledge; and while he drank water, people nearly everywhere in the country were feasting—those who could afford it. Roast turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, apple pie. Stan alternately experienced portions of blissful eternity and devilish torment. At this stage, he often regretted his stubbornness and rebuked himself, wanting to give in, but he couldn't. He was trapped: If he told them who he was, they would execute him; if he didn't tell them, he would starve. And so he struggled to be content, and his body weakened. For hours—though he did not comprehend them as hours—he sat or rested on his bed in a calm bliss, his heart beating slowly, his mind neutral, as he listened to and watched the nothing happening in the cell. He floated into sleep unaware. The random chatter of his brain subsided to a whisper and became silent. He ceased washing. At last he attained what ascetics have searched, fasted, and prayed for over the centuries: a sheer lightness, not from self-deprivation, but rather an adaptation. He now felt protected and insulated.

He did not care what happened to him, but the fellowship he had joined with other prisoners, though he had no communication with them, held him to his pledge to being non-cooperative. He wanted to remain in solidarity with them, although he had no clue about how they were doing. He was grateful that the prison did not subject him to grueling temptations. It was easier for him to be kept in isolation than to be subjected to direct attempts to break his spirit.

For a month this torture went on, and Stan entered what might be described as spiritual hibernation—a survival mechanism to a winter of bodily and mental suffering—and by the end he began to experience preparation for entrance into the kingdom of heaven, a complete and childlike peace, because by now he was near death from the lack of nutrition.

† † †

When the door opened, the sudden noise and movement made Stan quail and believe for a moment that he had died.

The guards exclaimed at the bad smell, like a "blanking nursing home—a sewer," they said.

From pure spirit, Stan mustered the strength to wobble to his feet and ask, "Are you taking me?"

The guards were shocked at how emaciated the man was and one of them said, "You better sit down, and you"—this to the other guard—"go for a wheelchair."

When the chair arrived, they pushed him through the maze of the prison and into the same rooms where they had performed the intake medical examination, as Stan faintly remembered.

A guard ordered Stan to strip and he did so excruciatingly slow, not only because of his weakness but because his right shoulder had frozen and he had to do it one-handed. The guards watched, mortified. When he was at last naked, after snapping on gloves they lifted him onto a stainless steel table and made him lie down on his back. They tied his hands and feet, and there he was, stark naked, spread eagle.

The male administrator—whom Stan remembered from his intake interview—appeared, his face hovering above Stan's face.

Stan believed that they would kill him by lethal injection. "May I see a chaplain?" he asked.

The administrator jerked his body upright and spit in exasperation. "Chaplain?" he squeaked tightly. "You don't need a chaplain. The whole damned population is made of chaplains. The guards are chaplains. I'm a chaplain; wouldn't you like to confess to me?"

Leaning over again in Stan's face, he spoke with a soft growl. "You think you're strong, don't you?"

Stan said nothing.

"We have the legal right to keep you lying here for 24 hours. And all we must do is remove you from the table for a breather. The regulations don't say for how long. In other words, Mr. A.U., we can put you on the table for as many sessions as we like. To end this, all you have to do, Mr. A.U., is give us your name, Social Security number, birthplace, and your sentence, and then you can take a shower, put on some nice clean clothes, and we will see about building back your strength. We have IVs handy right here and doctors available to start you on food. How about it, Mr. A.U.? Do you want to get off the table now? Do

you want to regain human society? Don't you want to be a person again?"

The administrator paused for a moment, and then said, "You might as well tell us who you are, because we know already."

Stan whispered, but the administrator could not hear. The administrator leaned too close and gagged with the smell of filthy human flesh and the repugnant translucence of Stan's skin.

The administrator stood erect, pallid and dismayed.

Stan whispered again, and the administrator turned to the guard who stood nearby. "What did he say?" he demanded.

"He said 'No thank you,'" the guard said flatly.

The administrator spun around and escaped from the room.

† † †

Stan was not uncomfortable, except for being cold—his feet, hands, and skin—but this passed and he did not shiver. He fainted away. He rose back to consciousness and did not know how long he had been on the steel table. He was aware of flushing with warmth, of a soft mattress under him, a blanket over him, and a dull pain in his arm. He fell asleep and awoke, feeling new energy. The pain was from a tube stuck into his arm. "Oh, no," he said faintly. *I gave in to them and I don't remember. Oh well. If I told them, it was not me who willed it; my weakness triumphed. My desire to live a little longer was stronger than my will. It must be God's intention.* He drifted into sleep again. He was insensible to how long he faded in and out of consciousness. His awareness of his environment and state of being—and therefore his memory from those hours—was jumbled and fragmentary.

† † †

Eventually, he learned he was no longer in the prison, but in a hospital in Boise, Idaho. A nurse told him that he had been brought there by ambulance three days ago. He was still in prison custody, chained to the bed in a room with a screen down the middle; a prison guard hovered nearby around the clock.

After he was out of danger of dying, the medical staff put him onto a solid food diet, increasing the quantity day by day, and he began to gain weight. When he was minimally healthy enough

to return to his cell, the doctors refused to release him as the prison administration ordered.

One day when he felt well, he asked the guard if he could look from the window of his room. He studied the guard and tried to imagine what kind of person he was. He was shorter than average, muscular and stocky, and he had thick, hairy arms. Stan guessed him to be 50 years old.

His face a blank, the guard unlocked the restraint from the bed, helped Stan walk to the window, and scooted a chair up for him, but Stan remained standing and held on to the sill with his good arm. As the guard withdrew to the door, he said, "Merry Christmas" with a wisp of an accent.

Like a child who has been cooped up too long with an illness, Stan looked outside in wonder. His room was on the third and highest floor, and below him was a landscaped courtyard; straight across the yard another hospital wing blocked his view, but to the left, the scene was open, and Stan could see a smooth horizon and winter clouds with peach and golden sunlight strongest in the west. Between him and the horizon stretched a dark silhouetted band of bare trees. Tiring, he sat and watched until the distant light of the sky was supplanted by more immediate artificial lights. In the courtyard below, a smallish evergreen tree that was covered with bright, multicolored bulbs swayed in a fresh, gusty breeze.

The next morning Stan began exercising again, hampered by his right arm that was still immobile against his side, and the jolts of pain that seized him when he moved it from this position. Later in the day they took him for X-rays. There were no broken bones, but impingements had developed. He would need an MRI scan and the prison refused to allow it—too expensive. A physical therapist began coming to loosen and stretch the joint, though it hurt dreadfully. Besides this, every day he received permission to sit in the chair to look from the window, and it was his primary pleasure, aiding his recovery more than anything else, as was evident to the nurses.

While no one in the hospital said anything direct about it, Stan knew by subtle comments and facial expressions that they condemned the treatment the prison had given him, and that the prison administration had yielded to the hospital's forceful

recommendations for his care. Even so, Stan believed that medical personnel were afraid to talk with him, and that the prison had uncompromisingly directed that he was to have no contact with anyone, especially other prisoners.

But Stan could not help but hear through the screen in his room, and he guessed that another prisoner was being kept behind the screen in the other half of the room. Lately, there had been a lot of activity and inaudible urgent conversation. Stan decided he would attempt to communicate with his neighbor. In the middle of the night, Stan called out, "Hey. Are you awake over there?"

Stan's guard glared and put his finger to his lips, but Stan ignored him and called out again. There was no answer, but another guard put his head around the curtain arrangement. "Trying to wake the dead?"

"No."

"Then shut up. The inmate is dead. He passed away."

Early the next morning, relatives of the deceased arrived and Stan overheard grieving and anger. A woman's emotive voice cried, "Why didn't the prison give him the insulin he needed? They let him die! We told the prison he was diabetic. We sent insulin. We called, and they ignored us. What's happened? And why do you have the ankle restraints on him? He's dead, for God's sake! He's not going to escape. Have some respect for the man, now he's gone. Take off the restraints. And why are you here? Dead men don't need guarding."

The guard sounded apologetic. "I'm sorry, ma'am. An inmate isn't dead until he's pronounced dead. I'm sure a doctor will arrive shortly. We have to follow the rules."

"What? You think the corpse will hop up and run? This is organized stupidity!"

The curtain jerked aside, and a woman of middling age stuck her head into Stan's space. He said, "Hello."

"Hello," she replied. "Did you know my son?"

Stan began to answer, but a hand from the other side of the curtain pulled her back. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but you can't talk to him." Then came scuffling sounds, grunting, and angry wailing as the curtain waved and rolled.

A deep voice said, "Let's go, Mother," and then came silence. Stan knew that the woman had left or had been dragged out, and the stiff, restrained body remained mere feet away, until they removed it a few hours later.

That evening before lights out, when a nurse came to check Stan's blood pressure, he asked, "What happened to the prisoner in the other bed? The one that died. Did they ever remove the restraints from the body?"

She gave a shrewd expression, as if this had been gossiped about all over the hospital, and was about to speak, but she suddenly looked at the guard, who glanced away indifferently. Reassured, she said, "The official coroner was delayed; so they cremated the body while it still wore shackles. What a disgrace."

+ + +

A few days later it was the New Year holiday, which Stan celebrated with a strenuous workout; he was stunned with how much his muscles had atrophied. On January 2nd, two weeks after he had arrived, they wheeled him from the hospital and returned him to the prison. When he passed into the prison infirmary for observation, he was confused and woozy.

Ms. DeLeon arrived in the early evening. Stan was sitting up on his bed reading.

"Mr. A.U., I am glad to see you are recovering from your hunger strike. Uh . . . I must tell you, tomorrow you'll be taken back to your isolation cell. You'll be given a normal menu and have limited privileges, such as reading material and occasional walks in the yard. I can't promise how many privileges."

Here she leaned closer. The guard who stood nearby did not seem to care—if he was listening, he did not show it. "I'm really glad you're recovering," DeLeon said. "The administration was badly frightened that you might have died from starvation. You weren't the only prisoner who pushed this. We eased back on the others earlier when we found some lost records and learned who they were, and so they didn't need to go to the hospital."

All along Stan had been thinking that this was preliminary to her telling him that since he had revealed his identity, or that they found his records, his sentence had been scheduled. "I

wonder," he said, "if you are going to execute me anyway, why didn't you let me die?"

Ms. DeLeon looked shocked. "Execute you? Why should we do that, Mr. A.U.?"

Stan froze. Ms. DeLeon's perplexity did not make sense unless . . . unless he had not given himself away while he was impaired. They still didn't know who he was! He hastened to redirect the subject and found the right question. "Why was the prison so keen on finding out who I am?"

"As I told you before, we can't release you into medium without knowing your background, and add to this the fact you are part of an internal resistance, which threatens our facility's security. A gang. We have to keep you and your group separated from the population, and from each other." Here her voice dropped to a whisper. "And I'm afraid the hunger strike was nearly disastrous, which is why we backed off. Not giving you food for so long was a mistake, that's all. The threats from Mr. Kiplinger, the deputy superintendent, who is in charge of security, by the way . . . his talk about leaving you exposed on the table was a bluff, as you probably already recognize."

"Really? A bluff?" Stan sighed. "It wasn't a hunger strike. It was enforced starvation. I did not refuse to eat."

She looked at him with curiosity and walked away from his bed, but she inexplicably came back, having gone in a circle. In her normal volume, she said, "Mr. A.U., I hope you don't take our kindness as weakness. We are resolved to run this prison and to fulfill our duty for the inmates to be secure from society and safe from each other. There's a lot of craziness in the country, and we are determined that what happens outside won't deter us from our mission. Fortunately, being isolated here in eastern Oregon keeps us from the difficulties of the cities.

"You might be interested to know we are at full capacity and have to fight daily to turn back the prisoners they're sending us. I don't think we are going to win, though. This prison is new—the construction was completed only a year ago, and already we are full. I'm just giving you a friendly warning. If we are forced to take more prisoners, then things will become tough for you and anyone else who makes life difficult. If you think your cell is small, imagine what it would be like with another person or

two. I'm only encouraging you to cooperate, and cease from conspiratorial activity. Once you give us the information we need, then we can move you to where you'll have more liberty."

She walked out of the infirmary door without further words. The next morning, the guards wheeled him to a cell near his old one. Once inside and the door locked, he began looking for what was new. The patterns made by forms in which the concrete walls had been poured were different. That was all. The most important thing not changed was this: he was alone, as before. But now that he was fully alive and the execution peril gone, he had to make plans for the future.

† † †

The prison was orderly and efficient. Gone was the dehumanizing treatment of his first month here. He was inmate A.U., number 4021949, no more and no less, subject to limits to his freedom, but entitled to certain rights as a human being. They gave him regular meals, tasty and nutritious; soap to wash with; and abundant reading and writing material, but nothing to read about current events. He included a thrice-daily exercise routine, which he performed before meals, much like before his trial. With the stretching program that the physical therapist had taught him, he began regaining flexibility in his shoulder, though it still hurt. The pain in his ribs became barely noticeable unless he coughed or sneezed. He prayed three times a day, at least, and he worked at Bible memorization, especially in the Psalms. Bibles were readily available in Brogan.

What else was different from his previous incarceration was that he wrote—pages and pages of memories of his wife and children, and parents, and Lydia, too—guarded words about her without any important identifying facts. Every night before he fell asleep, he walked in imagination through remembrances of those he loved, and this took away some loneliness, but he was careful not to lie awake in bed in the morning, because that left him depressed. After a month in the new cell, he no longer needed to be comforted by remembering, and besides, there was nothing new in that past to think about, and so, before he fell asleep, he relaxed by picturing himself in the North Cascades looking toward distant mountains, or regally floating over the

rugged land in a hot air balloon, or drifting in orbit above the earth.

There was one day when he slipped into despair. He lay on his bed facing the wall and did not move, not even to eat. He could not explain why this happened, but he was determined not to let it debilitate him. He slowly drew out if it. When the black mood came back another day, he forced himself to keep to his routine, and the utter despondence went away more quickly. He came to realize that, while he had forgiven his enemies in his conscious mind, under the surface he simmered in anger over how he and his family had been treated. He wondered how long he would struggle with this submerged anger.

He attempted to communicate by tapping on the walls. At first he heard nothing, and later his neighbors thumped back, but it was meaningless. They did not understand the code.

The guards became more humane—they were no longer under strictures against talking. There were six guards who rotated in shifts through Stan's block. They chatted as they brought food or conducted him to his nightly breath of air alone in a yard against the building. Stan talked little about himself, but he asked the guards questions and learned about their lives: their pleasures and troubles, babies being born and children starting school, and about arguments with wives; and he learned about their pay and financial woes. He learned about fishing weekends, rodeos, and baseball games. He saw how some of the guards' lives deteriorated—children on drugs and quitting school, wives leaving for other men, disease and ill-health. These things he heard in snatches because none of it came in proper conversation. When he asked about wider political and economic happenings, they would say nothing except "It's bad" or "Not going well" or "You've got it good here. No worries." And they would shake their heads. He offered them encouraging words and advice, and they laughed and took it well, and some of them later told him they had applied his counsel. Stan especially tried to get to know the guard who had allowed him to look out the window on Christmas Eve. His name was Albert, and Stan learned that his parents had emigrated from the Basque country in northern Spain. Stan hoped Albert would tell him stories about his parents, but Albert was not a talker.

Six months passed in this way, with Stan isolated, and little change. He asked about Ms. DeLeon, but the guards could tell him only that she still worked in the prison. Not once in those months had he seen her or heard from her, so that when she sent for him one day early in July he was greatly surprised.

She welcomed him into her office and offered a chair. The guard Albert stood in the corner and assumed a blank expression. He seemed to be accustomed to being irrelevant. Stan kept glancing at the pleasing lines of Ms. DeLeon's face and her female form, and checked himself by considering the new wrinkles and weight she had gained since he had seen her. She was as pretty as before, but something had been oppressing her. She began speaking and stuttered, uncomfortable because Stan watched her so closely, and grasping this, he looked away.

She began again. "You have someone looking out for you."

"I know."

She seemed to change directions. "Mr. A.U., I have been pleased with your conduct since you arrived here, and there's hope that you'll be granted more privileges. We have an outstanding work program where you can earn money, and also we have classes on a variety of subjects. You can take cooking, computers, mathematics, law . . . all kinds of classes, and there are religious services twice a week. Are you interested in printing, or making office furniture? Those are our two in-house industries. We also do specialty electronics assembly, but political prisoners are not allowed to work in that program. There are sports activities, which are open to all—softball, basketball, soccer, and weight training. Brogan Federal Correctional Camp takes pride in being a model for other prisons, both in the state of Oregon and in the federal system. I say this so that you might be heartened. It's not my decision whether or not you will be released into medium security, but I want to let you know: I'll be reporting to Mr. Kiplinger soon and I will recommend that you should be."

Stan nodded and said, "Thank you."

"Well, I want to hear from you, Mr. A.U. Anything you need? Are you being treated well?"

"That's a big question, isn't it, Ms. DeLeon?" Stan said, looking her full in the face.

She blushed suddenly. He looked away again, realizing he had inadvertently said something she thought suggestive, and spoke hastily, "Yes. I'm being treated well. I'd like some newspapers, but other than that, there's nothing I really need. More fresh fruit would be nice."

Ms. DeLeon said nothing, and thinking the meeting was over and that he was dismissed, Stan stood up to leave.

"There's something else," Ms. DeLeon said. "A letter arrived, and I wanted to personally deliver it to you. Besides, I had to give it to you rather than use our regular mail service because it did not meet the rules for mail. It didn't have your name and number, nor did it bear a return address."

Forgetting where he was, Stan sank back into the chair, not removing his eyes from the letter in his hand. The envelope had been partly torn, and he removed thick white pieces of paper.

"Naturally, we—I—read it for security and intelligence reasons," Ms. DeLeon said.

Stan knew by the writing and scent that it was from Lydia. Confusion and joy, and questions about how the letter came to him here when he had been anonymous, prevented him from taking in the meaning of its words. He stared at them without seeing, and he fumbled the letter back into the envelope and tucked it into his uniform pocket to read when he returned to his cell. He again stood up to leave.

Incongruously to Stan's mental state, tears welled in Ms. DeLeon's eyes and she said, "I envy you having someone who loves you. I hope you deserve her."

Stan looked down at Ms. DeLeon in wonder. She crossed her legs and turned away from him. Her hand supported her head from under her chin, and her eyes blinked rapidly. Stan sensed a recent tragedy and wanted to ask her what she meant, but the guard had opened the door and was waiting for him to leave.

When he reached his cell, he put the letter on the bed and looked at it in the envelope, reluctant to read it. He was anxious to see what Lydia wrote, but he knew that as soon as he did, the fading process would begin: he would reread the letter until its freshness died. He wanted the enjoyment to last as long as possible, though he knew this idea was futile.

Curiosity overcame reluctance. He picked up the envelope, which was addressed only as "A.U., Brogan Correctional Camp." There was no stamp or postmark. He removed the two sheets of paper.

June 20

Dear A.U. (Hey You!),

We learned from friends where you are being kept. It is a miracle that word came to us, and there is a story behind the transmission, which I cannot tell now! We heard about your trial and how they mistreated you when you arrived at the prison. We also heard you have recovered your strength. I know it has been hard, but we are joyful because you are alive and well. I would like to come see you and then we can have a real wedding in the prison, but the leaders here say this would not be wise, for reasons you can guess. Every day my love for you grows.

I am now living again in Canada. Since I wrote last (We learned you received my letter!), I returned home with my sister and father. Soon after, things became worse. Israel and his friends had been asked to leave home because they carried guns. They said they were moving to Canada and begged us all to follow them, and they promised they would put away their guns. After they left, robbers began to steal the livestock and equipment. They burned the school for us and some of the men were beaten. Women were beaten, too, one night, and I hid with the children. Later, the electricity went off and we used generators, but there wasn't enough fuel to last forever. My father decided that we had to leave and all our friends agreed. We sold as much as we could (That was a prodigious yard sale!) but we did not sell the house and the adjoining land. The family graveyard is still ours—I thought you might want to know. I left a flower bouquet on the resting place of your beloved wife. We all followed Israel and our conditions are better now. The Canadian government is

more stable, but the laws are stricter. Our good neighbor who was your friend became ill, but he is recovering. He sold his property and he and his Mrs. moved with us, but I do not think they will join the community. They bought a house and land nearby, as before. The boys still go to his house to watch television! Isn't it funny? I would like to watch the news, but such "news" is mostly bad, or it's mindless fluff.

What do you think about the fighting? From what we hear, it is terrible in the U.S. People who grow their own gardens will do much better than those in the big cities. I cannot imagine what it would be like to live in a city, or in the countryside around cities, with wild gangs roving for food and what they can steal. We are fortunate to have friends here who will share their home with us. It is crowded (lots of babies), but we have land enough to spread out in, and we are building our housing. Right now we live in a mobile home we bought and repaired. We are learning to appreciate our history, having to live it ourselves. Remember Jesus said, "Foxes have their dens, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." We have a lovely garden and our friends keep bees. The honey is very sweet.

Since we have tidings about you, you might use that same route to reach us with mail. I'd love a letter, but I leave it to your discretion.

As always, I pray for you and your children every day. My hope is that we all can be rejoined soon. I wish I could meet your children. But if not in this world, then we will enjoy fellowship in the next world. I better understand your decision, and I respect and admire you more than you know. Especially, I am happy that you convinced me to stay home. What would I have done if I had been alone? Surely I would have become lost. I am content here now, and there are views of the mountains! Thank you!

Your sister, friend, and wife in spirit and truth,

-xxxxx

> P.S. I will write again when we figure how to deliver the letter. (Of course, I don't know if you received this.) There are amazing people who have helped us. This beautiful story will have to wait, or you can use your gifted imagination.

The letter was written on June 20. It was now July 9. The letter had taken almost three weeks to arrive. It was not hard for Stan to imagine the crux of the story—that the Assembly was functioning in some capacity, though obviously crippled. Somehow, news of Stan had broken out from the prison. It had to be prisoners who transported here with him, or the escapees from the truck. Or maybe prison employees carried the information beyond the fences. Could be through the hospital. Whatever the case, Stan was pleased to hear from Lydia, and he believed that more breakthroughs might come, though he did not allow his expectations to rise too high. Disappointment would be sure to follow; the only unquestionable thing was that this young woman loved him.

At the week's end, a guard came to Stan's cell and asked if he wished to see Ms. DeLeon. She had something to ask him, he said. Stan quickly brushed his teeth and rinsed his face. When he arrived at her office, DeLeon seemed troubled again and Stan thought she wanted to talk about her personal life, but was prevented by the guard's presence.

"Mr. A.U., I have thought . . . of a way to facilitate . . . your release into medium security," she said with difficulty. "Since, by freak events, we have no record of your identity, or of your criminal history, we have to assume the worst. But on the other hand, given the current political strife, you may have a legitimate reason for remaining anonymous. You are fortunate to have come here, because our . . . superintendent is determined that all inmates will be treated fairly. So that we can know you better, we would like to conduct a psychological evaluation. Taking the tests is entirely voluntary. There will be a battery of tests and questions. If you agree to them, you are free to decline to answer anything or to terminate testing at any time."

She handed him some papers. "Read these, and if you agree to be evaluated, sign the bottom of this page. You can sign now, or else you may take the papers and think about it."

Stan skimmed over the papers and said he would prefer to think about it more.

"That's all, Mr. A.U., except you have another letter. You're a popular guy." She handed him an envelope, which appeared like the one he just received from Lydia. Stan left her office wondering why he had received letters in such quick sequence.

When he returned to his room, Stan was divided, as before, between reading the letter right away and waiting. He decided to wait and fell back into his daily routines, but he never stopped thinking about the letter. He was pleasantly exhausted at the day's closing when he crawled onto his bed to prepare for sleep, and he carefully opened the envelope. It was not what he expected. Rather than from Lydia, shockingly, this one was from Ms. DeLeon.

> Mr. A.U.,
>
> Forgive me for impersonating a letter from your wife, but this was the only way I could communicate with you privately. I am not sure how to begin, because this is complex . . . I was married when I was in college, and my marriage did not last. My husband, Denis, and I separated after five years, and I was given custody of my daughter, Vitalia, who just turned four years old—we call her Vee. My husband was in law enforcement, and after we separated, I was concerned about him prying into my life, and so I needed to move away from Salem. I applied for prison work around the Northwest and landed this job. We, my daughter and I, moved here and fell in love with this part of Oregon, but I was lonesome. Deputy Superintendent Kiplinger, your nemesis here by the way, and I began seeing one another. The problem is, Kiplinger was married—*is* married, I should say. Our relationship didn't last, mostly because I got pregnant. Kiplinger—his name is Clayton—said if I took care of the pregnancy he would help me buy a house and he would divorce his wife. He gave me money for the

procedure and I hired a babysitter for my daughter, took a few days off, and went to Boise alone and stayed in a motel. When that was over and I returned to Brogan, Kiplinger suddenly changed. He said he and his wife were going into counseling to work out their problems, but it was a lie because he soon took up with another female prison employee, just as he had with me.

You may think it strange that I confided in you, but I'm so alone. When I heard how Kiplinger nearly starved you to death, I grew to admire you, and the others who stood with you, for your dedication. Then the letter arrived from your wife, and I wished I had someone I could trust. But none of this is why I am writing—it is only to help you believe that I am sincere. There is likely to be an official investigation into Kiplinger's conduct. I have personal reasons for not wishing him well, but it is more. His behavior toward prisoners is unethical. There's something funny about all this that I do not understand. Apparently, the previous superintendent tried to discipline Kiplinger, but the action was killed from higher up in the system. The new superintendent, who just came on board six months ago, is quietly conducting his own investigation, but it is not going well. Few are willing to talk with the new super about this matter.

I want you to talk with him, Mr. A.U. Talk with the new superintendent. Please tell him what Kiplinger did to you. Your firsthand account will carry weight. I have wanted to ask some of the other prisoners who were mistreated, but I am afraid. I don't know who else I can trust, but I know I can rely on you. You are a person who can keep secrets.

Your wife sounds like an interesting girl. I am sorry for my bitter words about hoping you were worthy of her devotion. You can understand. They came from my own sad experience. If we receive more letters from her, I will be sure you get them.

Please consider my request to talk with our superintendent. He is a kind and courageous man, and

he has a nice family. I met them once. Also, do not forget about the opportunity for the psychological evaluation. For me, I would not think it necessary, but it might help persuade Kiplinger to let you out of segregation. He has power here, and he has support within the Bureau of Prisons.

Do not write anything important back to me. Wait until I can arrange another meeting.

Your friend,

-Mercer DeLeon

P.S. Please destroy this letter.

Stan had been ready for sleep, but now he was jittery and his heart raced. He stood over the commode and tore the letter into minute fragments, which together looked like a mouse nest floating in the toilet water, and he flushed them. It seemed that political intrigue had followed him into prison. He had no desire to take the psychological exam; nor did he wish to testify against the security chief, especially after learning about the power conflict within the federal prison structure. He could see no way to becoming involved in this without risking exposure, either of himself or of organized resistance inside the prison. How could he talk with the superintendent of the prison without the security head learning about it? His years on the fringes of the Assembly had taught him to ask these kinds of questions. He decided that he had better stay free from the struggles. On the other hand, Ms. DeLeon's personal troubles deeply concerned him—dealing with this, and not the internal investigation, was the course he should take. And with the matter settled, he was able to sleep. Life was simple in his cell.

The next morning, after devotions and exercise, he washed up; and then he struck an idea, a monumental and yet simple idea consistent with the path he had taken. He put the idea aside for the present, wrote a letter to Lydia, and waited.

† † †

It was after the weekend—on Monday morning—when Ms. DeLeon again called him to her office. As always, a guard stood

handy, and again, it was Albert, trying to be inconspicuous, but noticing everything.

"Well, Mr. A.U.," she said, "have you considered whether or not to take the evaluations?"

"Yes, Ms. DeLeon. I've decided not to subject myself to them. You can say to anyone that it's resistance to being held a political prisoner."

DeLeon frowned. "I'm sorry. What about the other meeting I mentioned?"

Stan shook his head *no* and said, "Same reason."

"But you . . . we . . ," Ms. DeLeon began her objection, but stopped herself.

The verbal percussion caught Albert's attention, and he glanced over to them. Seeing tension between DeLeon and Stan, he shook his head to himself and pushed his lips together, knowingly. It was not common, but female workers at the prison occasionally developed emotional or physical relationships with prisoners. He had seen it before and thought that this here was a lovers' quarrel.

Stan read the situation and said to the guard, "I wonder if you might give us a few confidential moments?"

"All right with you?" Albert asked Ms. DeLeon, who nodded. Albert rolled his eyes and said, "Okay. I'll step outside, but the door stays open, and I'm watching. You hear me?"

Stan and DeLeon ignored Albert's suspicion. Keeping his voice low, Stan explained how he came to be in prison. He said nothing about the Assembly. He only spoke about when he prayed outside the abortion place and how this was a recognition of the humanity of the children who were being killed there. His voice contained no hint of condemnation, but was soft, factual, and undramatic. DeLeon first showed hardness in her face, and anger, but as Stan spoke, she weakened and bent her head. When he finished, she said, "That's why you're in prison?"

"Partially. There's more, but this is *how* I came to be here."

Ms. DeLeon turned away and did not speak again for several minutes. The slight bobbing of her head and her sniffling said that she was crying. She dabbed her cheeks with a handkerchief. He let her cry, and when she subsided, he said as a conclusion, "There is forgiveness, you know."

Albert, who had indeed been watching, but could not hear, decided that whatever was happening had gone on long enough. He stalked into the office. "Has this offender been speaking improperly, ma'am?" Ms. DeLeon shook her head and said, "No. He's all right. We've been talking about my problems. He's a minister."

Albert nodded and affirmed something vaguely with certain intonations. He said, "You can't believe them, ma'am. The snakes will take advantage of a tenderhearted girl like you. Didn't I warn you about Kiplinger?"

A window had opened to broach the subject in front of the guard, and Stan ventured further. "You said you and your husband were separated. Are you legally divorced?"

Ms. DeLeon glanced up at Albert, who only rolled his eyes again and turned around, saying, "I'm not here."

She looked back at Stan. "We are not divorced, but we have begun the proceedings."

"Do you love your husband?"

"I did. I thought I did. But we fought and he was cruel to me."

"Did he ever hit you?"

"He was cruel in other ways. He was immature and selfish."

"What about you?"

"I was cruel and immature and selfish, too. It just didn't work out. Some devilry made it so we couldn't get along."

"You have said you admired me and my wife—she's really my fiancée, but I can't explain it now . . . the dedication we have to one another. She and I believe that a husband and wife were meant to be together for as long as they both are alive. You have a child. Denis has a daughter. It's been hard for you. There seem to be insurmountable problems, but I believe with all my heart that you and your husband are meant to be together, for each other, but also for your daughter. True love is not an emotion; it's life itself. Love is a way of being. Even if your husband never wishes to see you again, you can be true to him, and this will be the way of blessing for you, and maybe how you can be together again as man and wife, in the future."

Ms. DeLeon's voice was cold. "It's impossible. He's a turd, and I've been a whore, and I aborted my baby. Someone else's baby, not his. He'll never want me back."

Albert broke in with his Basque accent. "Wait. Wait. Wait a minute. I'm stepping outside."

Stan smiled at Albert and resumed. "Have you learned anything since you left him?"

"Yes."

"Are you a better person?"

"No."

"But you realize that you are not."

"I know I'm weak."

"Well, maybe he's learned something, too."

"It's possible."

"If you could wish for anything in your relationship with Denis, and if wishing would make it true, what would you ask?"

Ms. DeLeon thought about this. Her voice became unstable and teary, and her eyes dampened again. "I'd wish he were a different person, and I was different, and we could completely and forever forget the bad things we said to each other, and did. I wish I could start over."

"So, if this could happen, you'd wish to be his wife again?"

"Yes, I guess. But it's impossible."

"With God nothing is impossible."

"I wonder."

"Do you still think there's anything or anyone other than your Creator who will be able to provide for your deepest needs? Having a husband isn't a necessary part of a young woman's life, but I think God has this for you. You are a mother. You have a husband; it's only whether you will live with him in contentment and work through the struggles, or live apart from him."

Ms. DeLeon bent her head down again. It seemed a long while before she spoke. "You're right. It's either God or nothing. What do you think I should do?"

"I'm not a marriage counselor, and I think you'd need to work with someone who is, but that's down the road."

"We tried counseling, but he quit."

"I understand. Then I'd begin by becoming the most beautiful woman in the world. A woman irresistible to your husband, not only physically, but in your character and spirit."

Ms. DeLeon smiled suddenly through her tears, and the anxiety lines and stress vanished in the smile. Stan noticed a dimple in

her left cheek near her eye. She looked beautiful and irresistible to him right then, and Stan felt an impulsive yearning in his abdomen, which he slammed away. He shivered and remembered the letter to Lydia in his hand.

"How do I become beautiful?" she said, still smiling.

Stan slowly looked over his shoulder and then turned back around. "There's something I want to ask you first—I need to say this while the guard is out—here's a letter I've written to my fiancée. Give this to the person who gave you her letter."

"Why? Wait a second. Someone in the prison post office handed it to me. An employee from outside."

"Good. Do you remember who it was?"

"A bald man with tattoos."

"Don't, don't tell me. All right. If he doesn't understand, then just pass it off as a mistake and keep the letter. If he takes it and says nothing consequential, don't ask him any questions. Can you do this?"

"Sure. I'll try. But I'll have to read the letter first. In case it contains escape plans."

Stan laughed and said, "Read it. It's pretty ordinary stuff and lets her know I'm alive and that I've gotten mail from her."

Stealthily taking the envelope, she held it in both hands behind her desk. "To My Sister in Travail," she read out loud. "Her name is probably pretty, or sad."

Now relaxed, Stan resumed his explanation. "How to become the most beautiful woman for your husband? By reading the Gospels. Start with the book of Mark. Pay attention to the parts about forgiveness. Then I'd start writing to your parents or calling them on the telephone. They are alive, right? Good. And there are other things, too, that I'll explain to you later. Read Proverbs, chapter 31, about the virtuous woman. Someday you should read Song of Solomon, but save it to read with your husband. It's a love poem in the Bible. You might try sending him quotations."

"A love poem in the Bible?" She was getting giggly.

"Well, you're a little ahead of yourself. But it's good for you to be encouraged."

"I am."

Stan and Ms. DeLeon talked for another half hour until Albert barged in and said, "It's quitting time." The conversation's end was lighthearted and cheerful. Stan knew that she moved along difficult ground, one with sinkholes and crevasses, and unstable rock slopes that could bury her.

Over the following three weeks, Stan did not see anyone, other than guards who brought the food and let him out for fresh air after dark. A positive change was that Albert now seemed to have been assigned to Stan, who began to regard the man as his private guardian. At Stan's inquiry, Albert said his last name was Rementeria, but it was evident that he was disinclined to converse. When Stan persisted in grilling him about personal information, he said with some ferocity, "I keep my eyes and ears open, and my mouth shut. I make sure you have what you need. That's my job. Leave it there."

One day he brought Stan a letter and said, "Ms. DeLeon asked me to give you this."

The seal on the envelope had been broken. Albert left and Stan dropped onto his bed and removed the papers. There was a letter from Lydia, and with it, a separate note. He put Lydia's letter to the side and read the note. It was from Ms. DeLeon.

> Dear Mr. A.U., I sent your letter, and this reply came sooner than I anticipated. I have taken your advice, and I am attending a local church. It is not all I hoped for, but a woman there told me about a secret prayer meeting at her home. I want to see what it is like. I called my husband and told him I wanted to work things out between us—to keep trying. He was surprised to hear from me, and I am pleased with how open he was about talking. He plans to come here next weekend, and we have a picnic date at a park. We are going to build a fire and cook hamburgers and play with Vee and talk about normal things, I hope. I don't have illusions about this being easy or restoring our marriage, but it is a start. Thank you! I hope to talk with you soon.
>
> Until later . . .
>
> Mercer

P.S. Have you changed your mind about the psychological evaluation? If not, this letter from your fiancée should make a difference.

Stan presently took up Lydia's letter, which was shorter than usual. It read:

August 5. Dearest A.U., I must spare the small talk. This is too important. Everything is fine around here anyway, except the wind never stops blowing. I have received your letter and it was wonderful to hear from you. Believe it or not, conditions in your prison are better than for most people in the States. I want you to begin writing because I have a way to publish. I can't tell you about it, but you will have to trust me. Begin writing about your wife, not me—you know who I mean. Put in xxx's where her name should be and I can fill in. Tell about her life and death. Write the truth about her as a daughter, mother, and wife. Some lofty people have lied about her, and it is important for everyone to learn what she really was like. There are other subjects to write about, too, but for later. You can write next what you want, and if you have the right idea, then I will use it, and if not, I will tell you, or give you the subjects that will make the most difference. It is important to keep unnecessary information out of our letters in case prying eyes come sneaking where they have no business. I mean, in your letters you must write detailed information, but we should keep out incriminating information whenever possible. I can say this: I have met an old friend of yours. It is a long story. Aren't they all? I hope we can tell long stories to one another someday.

Please, can you start writing right away about your wife? (And I will not be jealous.) I can't tell you how important this is. I love you, my brother!

-xxxxx

P.S. Happy birthday!

The letter from Lydia was intriguing because of how it came to him. Her request did not square with any development he could imagine, and so he allowed it to be an untroubling mystery. And he had completely forgotten about his birthday. He was now 30 years old. The delivery system seemed to be improving because this letter had taken only nine days to arrive.

+ + +

Because he had relived his past and thought so much about Mindy and the Sterne family, writing about them was easy. People had heard her speech and had seen the images of when she was killed on live television and on videos, but they also heard the relentless follow-up propaganda calling her a witch who murdered the children of doctors and policemen, and who (according to some sources) ground up and spiced them for sausage. Stan had not heard the worst grisly details of those fabrications, but in contrast to all of them, he told the true story about Mindy. He told about her ancestry. He described the mature sister with six younger siblings, a situation demanding that she grow up while she was still young. He wrote about the tender love Mindy demonstrated for Esther in the mental hospital and the love she gave at the handicapped camp before he met her. He wrote of her hospitality when she invited his troubled sister Sarah to live with her family, and her kindness to him as an awkward suitor, and the sleepless nights nursing his children, and the tragedy of her abduction and depraved usage by the brigands, and her escape from them, and her courage and purity when she gave her life to call the nation to repentance. Stan did not know who would read this, or how far it might be transmitted, but he gave everything he had, going without sleep and neglecting to eat or exercise or even to pray. He wrote it through and rewrote it, and by the end, he had completed thirty-four pages of neat script.

Albert had watched the process, and when he came into Stan's cell and found him napping in the middle of the day, and the tidy pile of papers on the floor—the final draft—he picked it up and grumbled to the groggy inmate, "I suppose you'll want me to give your *letter* to Ms. DeLeon. I don't get paid for this."

Stan was alarmed that Albert was asking for a bribe and said almost inaudibly, "I don't have any money."

Seeing his anxious face, Albert laughed and said, as he folded and stuffed the papers under his shirt into the front of his pants, "Joking, son. Just joking."

The next day, Stan fretted about whether the article had reached Mercer and if she had passed it to the postal worker. He imagined his words flowing along a stream, from person to person, the pages flying from furtive hand to furtive hand like a baton in a relay race, a leather bundle tossed from one exhausted horse rider to a fresh one, the torch in an Olympic marathon—the words touching Lydia and going . . . where? There were a hundred ways the article could go astray. Around bedtime he heard the familiar humming and metallic clicking of his heavy door being electrically unlocked. The door swung outward, and Albert and Mercer entered. Stan jumped up. This was the first time she had been in his cell. Albert pulled the door nearly closed behind them.

Breathlessly, Mercer said, "I can't stay long. I need to tell you how incredibly powerful your article was. I cried all through the second half. I had no idea what was going on. Your wife was beautiful. I saw her broadcast in January last year when it cut into the television program I was watching. January 26, 2018. It was shocking, and I wasn't entirely sympathetic then to the girl's cause. I became more confused when the government began giving its version, but— I copied your article—I hope that's okay—and gave it to the superintendent. He's made discreet inquiries and knows your story, and how you came to be here. Don't worry; he's determined to protect you. The government believes that you escaped in the court building bombing. They have no idea you are here. We have to be extremely careful, because Kiplinger and other administrators are loyal to the government. Kiplinger would only be too pleased, if he knew you were here, to hand you to the government for execution—even to do it himself—but, strangely, Mr. Timmons, I think you are safer inside than anywhere else.

"Let me tell you what's happening. Because of the general chaos outside and the disorganization of the government in power, the inmates here are able to pass information through the

prison's walls to combatants and other resistors. They're developing information sharing trails throughout the outside world. As it happens, the prison is a concentration of able political prisoners; it's becoming a decision-making hub and council for the whole movement."

Stan was taken aback at this revelation and was afraid it might be a trap, but he realized Mercer had used his real name. He knew that who he was would have come out eventually, if the article would be published using his name. These thoughts brought out the question that had been burning in his mind throughout the day: "You copied my article and gave it to the superintendent, but did you get my article outside?"

"Yes, of course," Mercer said strongly and smiled, her dimple showing. "You must write more."

+ + +

When he was alone again, Stan breathed deeply and then paced in tight circles on the minuscule floor space. The activity having cleared his mind, he sat down and wrote a list for future articles. He would begin to write in the morning; the next article would be the reality about the Chinook Assembly and the Mollicoat Estate, about the people who worked there, what they did—the dance festivals and international conferences, about the beauty of the buildings, the landscaping, virgin forest and rock cliffs. He went to bed stewing about this. Long before sunrise, he awoke and began working. He wrote about his parents and the younger families with children. He wrote about the historical buildings. With knowing authority, he concluded with the charge that the government had intentionally bombed the estate, killing everyone. He described the aftermath as he had witnessed it—how the government had turned the compound into a landfill, covering up disintegrated bodies with garbage. In the article's last paragraph, he promised another story, one explaining why the government had committed this unimaginable atrocity.

The writing and perfecting of his second article took Stan a full week because he had reinstated his discipline and worked in shorter shifts than he did with the first article. He could not remain healthy otherwise.

As with the earlier writing, Albert monitored Stan's progress without comment, and his native intuition told him when Stan was done, and he came for the story.

Nearly a whole other week passed, and Stan waited, not writing anything more. He was tired and discouraged and felt uncertain about the investment of his time and energy. At last he began the sketch for the third article and did not feel good about it. He set the papers aside, asking himself, how could words alone make any difference?

Albert came and asked, "How's it going?"

"Not good."

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When bringing supper the next day, Albert held out a familiar-looking envelope and said, "I'll trade with you." Stan gave him the rough, uncompleted exposition, which Albert stowed in the usual place and left. Stan wolfed his food to sooner read the letter. It was not from Lydia as he had hoped, but from Mercer.

> Dear Mr. Timmons,
>
> Do not think me imprudent for using your name. The contents of this letter are incriminating enough to have us both shot if we are discovered, names or no names. But I must tell you the amazing things that transpired as a result of your article, so that you will continue to write. I am sorry I have not told you sooner. Things are changing even at this moment. I am writing rather than visiting you in person because Kiplinger and his cronies would become suspicious if I saw you too often. Being the man he is, he would think we were having a romantic relationship, and that would be enough to get me fired and you beaten.
>
> Your story, with lovely photographs of your late wife Mindy, was circulated sooner than I expected. First, it flashed through the underground press and spread to a few alternative outlets. The text, with photos, has been storming the country through private emails. The government publicly ignored it until a couple of major newspapers and Internet sites picked it up. Some of

them honestly wanted this side to be told, and others intended to stir up trouble, but the results and effect have been amazing. Many of the people responsible for publishing your article in the mainstream press were fired and arrested. There have been political reprisals to those who expressed sympathy for you, and new rules immediately were put into effect to further suppress free speech—like the daily Internet "brownouts." This move made many people angry and determined to forcibly resist. People everywhere are wondering, and even those hard-core devotees who once blindly followed the government are having doubts. My parents are talking about your wife, about her call for repentance, and they are taking it seriously now that they understand. Copies of the first article found their way into the prison. Kiplinger is confiscating them, but he is too slow, because by the time they find a copy, it is already worn from being smuggled around and read. He has no idea that the articles are being written under his nose. It is impossible for me to describe to you what conditions are like on the outside. In some ways, life goes on as normal, but there is tension like a brewing thunderstorm or a big earthquake ready to pop loose. It is frightening, because there is sporadic fighting. Armed groups are fighting and defending themselves, and not only in a few places but everywhere in pockets. They appear from nowhere, bomb a building or attack a police unit and melt away. When rebels destroyed the court building where you were tried, it was isolated and uncommon. Those kinds of belligerent actions are increasing, and I fear will become worse.

Your article provoked additional chaos and unrest and fed it energy, but it is not your fault. You are only telling the truth. Think about this: You have a voice. People are listening. Is there any way you can stop the killing and destruction? This is not only my concern. The superintendent spoke to me, and I think your fiancée would be concerned, too, if I have read her right. (I hope you will tell me the story of your relationship, but I

understand that we have to keep unnecessary information out of the picture.) I still intend to pass your articles along, but please give thought to what I have said. Finish your third article and then keep writing. Many people are beginning to expect your words. You have to keep writing.

Lastly, destroy this letter. Who knows but Kiplinger may pull a surprise search in your block looking for your published article!

The picnic with Denis was strained but went well, considering. He asked me to move back to Salem into an apartment near him so he can see Vee more often, but I told him that I could not quit my job. (I did not tell him why!) He is thinking about moving here, but there is no employment for him close by. Is this right of me? Should I move back?

Thanks again for your encouragement.

Your friend,

-Mercer

As he had done before to the confidential letters, he tore this one into pieces. He wondered where the photos of Mindy had come from—Fr. Schmidt?—and hoped to see them, and the next instant, dread flooded over him that he *might* see them. He put the intrusive emotions aside and returned to the business at hand.

Energized and strengthened by Mercer's words, Stan retrieved his draft from Albert that night. Albert apparently knew that Stan would want it returned and had been carrying it on his person. Stan began to complete the known recent history of the Assembly—the true government of the United States and its allies—its purpose and accomplishments—what information he knew. After an hour or so, he took a break and wrote a note to Mercer suggesting it was too soon to relinquish her life here. "Be kind to Denis and communicate with him often," he wrote, "but let him pursue you. Maybe there's a job here in the prison for him."

The article only took two additional days to perfect, because Stan pushed himself to utter fatigue. With it he intended to explain why the government destroyed the Mollicoat Estate, and,

as Mercer had suggested, to call for *nonviolent* resistance, which had been the Assembly's basic principle and method in regard to people, if not property.

Accompanied by the ever-present Albert, Mercer came to his cell early in the morning to collect the article. It was Saturday, normally her day off. Stan had not washed his face or brushed his hair. She was in a hurry and skipped preliminary courtesy.

"You must submit to the psychological evaluation, Mr. Timmons," she said fervently. "I can't keep coming to your cell, nor can you be in my office. Letters can be purloined or intercepted. If you get into medium, we'll be able to talk more easily. We're also developing efficient ways to transmit messages out. Kiplinger is still powerful, but you will be impressed with the improvements. I beg you, please take the examination! But I have other things to report. Your second article—about the people of the Mollicoat Estate—is making as much impact as the first. No mainstream news outlets printed it this time, but people have been seeking the underground press, and its popularity is growing phenomenally, so much so that the mainstream press is crashing—losing all support and credibility. The government has taken over most of the companies, but I can't elaborate now."

"I'm sorry if I'm inattentive," Stan said. "I've been ill from obsession about my writing and from lack of sleep, and I'm finding it hard to attend to all of your words."

"Listen, Mr. Timmons. Because you knew your late wife so well, with your writing and its sincerity, the thousands and maybe millions who are reading your articles are able to sort truth from fiction and act appropriately in this great conflict. It means your wife's last words asking people to have courage, and to fight, and to love, and to die if needed, are growing in people's passions. Many had already been incalculably moved when they saw images of her death, but your writing is bringing many more into the movement and helping them carry on. What your wife sowed with her speech and her death, you are harvesting with your writing."

In his fatigue Stan could not comprehend the disparity between the words of an anonymous prisoner locked in solitary confinement and the power to influence millions of people. A

surge of doubt came over him—was this a ruse to get him to expose people in the Chinook Assembly? No, it couldn't be. He looked into Mercer's eyes and saw only admiration and eagerness for their work. She glanced away shyly. Stan did not feel important—he was the same insecure boy he always had been, but she believed he was a great and famous man.

From an unaccustomed angle he reached out and took her hand. Albert cleared his throat at the same time Stan's face twisted for an instant and then at once smoothed over.

"My damaged shoulder," Stan said. "It's not completely healed, an everyday pain I've mostly learned to ignore."

"I know about that," she said. "About such pain, I mean."

As Stan held onto Mercer's hand, he thought of his daughter, Chrysanthe. Though Mercer was about his own age, she was like a daughter. "I'll undergo the psychological examination," he said, "if you think it's best."

"I do. So does the superintendent. We'll be able to protect you, Mr. Timmons, and when the other prisoners know who you are, there's no telling what will happen. But we have to continue deceiving and pacifying Kiplinger."

"Yes, but why? What's our problem with Kiplinger? I thought he was losing control."

"He is, but he . . . he could have the prison bombed."

***A Genocide Awareness Project in Spearfish, SD. Fall, 1996.***

*Mt. Baker, an immutable dome, gray-streaked with ash, emerges into view as we walk uphill among trees. Ahead is the lodge in which we are to stay, the two children and I, but they are teenagers. We settle into the lodge after being registered by two female attendants. The lodge is a private shelter near the mountain base, at treeline, and it serves as a launch for climbs. Our plans are to leave early morning—1:00 a.m.—with the summit our goal. The children roll out their sleeping bags onto beds that are built into the wall with timbers. On the outside wall between their beds is a window showing a vista towards the mountain. More people are expected—other climbers—and the lodge will be full by nightfall. I find that I have forgotten my sleeping bag. Chrysanthe says, "Go back to Bellingham to the equipment store and buy one. You need a new sleeping bag anyway, Dad." I know this won't work, because I will not get back until late, and I think an attendant can loan me one. When I go to ask, I say how much of a disappointment it is that the mountain is gray and ugly. She says the mountain has been volcanically active lately, but a snowstorm is due to hit the mountain tonight, and by the time we are on it the mountain will be dazzlingly white.*

**–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons**

**Mt. Baker.**

## Chapter 28
# Final Examinations

Events moved slowly in the prison, while in the outside world the speed of disintegration alarmed the ordinary person—not the worst effects being an accelerated economic depression and the evolution of a veritable, albeit ineffectual, police state. From the social and political fragments of what had been the United States, people assembled what order they could. Mobs formed in certain locations when food and other necessities became scarce. People did what was required to survive; some were noble and others not. There were riots and looting. Trucks of goods were ambushed and robbed along the highways, and their contents sold on the black market, or given to those in desperate need. Diseases broke out which had been thought to exist only in the Third World. Where the federal and states' governments failed, neighborhoods and towns organized to defend themselves. Individuals and families rose to leadership apart from established government, and they made and carried out their plans, some crooked, others benevolent; most were practical.

Albert showed Stan a montage of amateur videos depicting all of this that he had stitched together.

Stan's words continued to pour out, and he crafted them into weapons that ignited the changes, but directed and formed them for good. On the other side of the conflict, the government and the supporters of decivilization fought back. Innocent, non-combative people were caught in crossfire. The prison filled far beyond capacity from an influx of new political criminals, and shouts of discontent echoed through the prison community, shouts coming from the regular criminals, and not from the political prisoners.

Two weeks after Stan agreed to take the psychological tests, Mercer contacted him by a quick note saying that she had arranged for the examination. She wrote:

> Don't worry; you will do fine. There will be three standardized tests and an interview. Answer the questions honestly. The tests have built-in lie scales. If you try to fool a test, it will skew the results and raise red flags. The clinical interview will be the hardest, but I think you will handle it well—you know when to refuse to answer a question and when to talk. Just let what you say be truthful, and the interviewer will get a good impression. They understand your commitment to not revealing your identity and I don't think they will re-fight that battle. Good luck. God Bless. –Mercer.

Soon after the note, Albert arrived and accompanied Stan to the area that held the consultation room. A half-dozen other prisoners were to be tested at the same time. This was the first time since he entered solitary that Stan had seen other prisoners up close, but there was no chance to talk. None of these prisoners had been in the transport truck with him. The examiner was a pleasant young fellow, but with a nervous tick beside his eye that jumped throughout the explanations of the tests. He was self-conscious about his twitch and kept saying, "I've not been sleeping well. Sorry for the distraction."

The men were allowed to sit where they liked inside a room containing large tables. Stan filled out the forms and answered all the questions. He held back on the parts requiring imaginative responses, because he was tempted to make the photos of people into short stories. Still, the other prisoners completed this section much earlier than he, the pressure of which kept his narratives incomplete. Afterwards, he was escorted back to his cell.

A week passed before the interview came—one more week of isolation—and he was led to a waiting room next to where he had taken the written tests.

The room—a narrow hallway with chairs along each wall—became extremely warm. He tried to ignore the discomfort by reading a book, but soon gave it up and began to chat with the other prisoners, some of whom had taken the written examinations when he did.

"Did you hear the latest rumor?" one asked Stan, his voice at a low volume.

"No. I don't hear any rumors. They keep me in solitary."

"Really? Why? You're privileged. Nobody has a private room anymore." He laughed. He might have been from India.

"What's the rumor?"

"The superintendent has defied the government by refusing to accept more prisoners at Brogan. The government threatened to sack him, but he didn't back down and that was the end of the matter, at least on paper. He probably will be 'replaced quietly.' I hope not."

"Why did he do that?"

The prisoner who had been speaking moved to the bench next to Stan to talk more confidentially. "I guess you wouldn't know. The prison was becoming disorganized with so many additional inmates. An earlier rumor had made the rounds, and it was about prisoners being brought here in railroad cars for mass execution. The prison did its best to kill that story, but everyone was scared. The superintendent tried to calm things by issuing a statement that was circulated throughout the compound. It said every inmate would be treated with justice. Not many believed it until we got word through underground communications. The superintendent told the government to take a flying jump in the lake. That's putting it mildly. He and Kiplinger nearly came to blows."

"Underground communications?" Stan asked too loudly.

The other prisoners shushed him, and Stan heard the word "informant" whispered, and the prisoner who had been speaking glanced around at everyone. Seeing no one official except Albert the guard, he continued, first pulling a newspaper out from under his belt.

"There's a guy out there who is exposing the corruption in the government. He's leading a revolution, you could maybe say. Things are turning around. You know why I'm here? Because I did my job, while my colleagues lounged around and sucked the public teat. I worked as a supervising engineer at the University of Oregon. I wanted our campus to be the most beautiful and our buildings the best designed and maintained in the state, and I wanted the buildings to be economical to build and maintain, but

I was told my job was to make everybody happy. I made some decisions against the will of the university trustees and they brought me up on embezzlement charges. I've not had a trial. Anyway, read this article. It's by Stanley Timmons. He was only a high school English teacher, but his words are powerful—not dramatic or eloquent in themselves but strong in humility and sincerity. You have the feeling he's real when everything else around is false. He's risen out of nowhere. A real leader, for once. Here, read this."

The man gave the newspaper, tattered and taped back together, to Stan, who was dumbstruck. He did not believe that the man had been talking about him. He had become a legend that he did not recognize. All he could think about was the pictures of Mindy on the page's left-hand side. He had not seen her image for so long, not since he was at Fr. Schmidt's house. There were even baby pictures of her.

"He escaped from captivity during a rescue at his trial," said another prisoner. "This gang in power can't find him. There's talk of him running for president, if we have a country left when this mess is over."

Stan acted like he was skimming the article, but in reality he could not think clearly, nor could he see through his tears.

"I *told* you the Timmons story is amazing," the engineer said, misconstruing the tears.

Stan turned the page and moved his eyes to the bottom of the article. He folded and returned the newspaper to the engineer. Shortly afterwards, the psychologist with the nervous eye tick called Stan in to be interviewed, though the tick seemed to have taken a rest. As Stan entered the large comfortable inner office that had curtained windows around two sides, he nodded formally to the man. A rich coffee aroma filled the air. Bookshelves lined the paneled walls. Under one window, a massive wooden desk faced the center of the room where two soft chairs had been placed, turned nearly head-on, but set at slight angles to each other. Two guards stood nearby.

"Sit down please, Mr. A.U."

Each man scrunched around in his chair to find the best position. Stan tried to relax.

"We have processed your tests," the interviewer began, "and I must say, Mr. A.U., you're the most normal man I've met. Except for a slight indication of ethics obsession, you are right dab in the middle of the human race. Actually, it's normal to be obsessive about something. If you weren't obsessive, I'd really be worried. I wish I was as normal as you are. I've said the word normal a lot, haven't I?"

Stan did not answer, but smiled and flicked his hand sideways to dismiss the interviewer's concerns. Then reconsidering, he said, "I've been called normal before."

"You have?" The interviewer seemed to be disappointed. "I'm pretty sure you haven't murdered or raped anyone and you are safe to release into medium, though it's not my decision. Good, then; we've taken care of that. But I have a problem; we have a lot of normal people in prison. They're people who have made bad choices about their loyalties, their politics. I can't help that. But I'm required to ask a few questions. These are standard questions, so don't take them personally."

Here the interviewer glanced to assure himself that a guard stood close by.

"Mr. A.U., have you ever conspired to overthrow the United States government?"

"No, not really."

"Good. Would you be willing to take a lie detector test?"

Stan shrugged his left shoulder and tried to look as if he did not care about anything.

The examiner studied Stan a moment and then continued. "Has *anyone you have known* ever conspired to overthrow the government?"

Stan thought for a moment. The Assembly had not attempted to overthrow the government; rather it took on government functions and waited for the government in power to collapse under the weight of its own decay. He answered, "No, but I know people who were dissatisfied with the government."

"Oh, is that so?"

Stan hesitated. A warning stole over his heart. Even in prison, especially in prison, the hunt for dissent would relentlessly storm forward and flatten people. He tried to dodge giving a personal

answer. "It's no secret. Many people are unhappy about government corruption and oppression."

"Really, Mr. A.U. You're telling me something of which I'm not aware. You've been in solitary confinement for months, without any outside contact. How could you have this knowledge that I, a person who is free and who watches the news every day, don't have?"

Now Stan was in doubt. Did this man know about his letter exchange with Lydia, or did he suspect "underground communications"? Stan's intuition said he was not to be trusted. But Stan must seem to be cooperating.

"I'm not totally out of touch. Guards talk. I really think you know about the unrest everywhere; only an idiot wouldn't know. You're playing a game with me, right?"

The interviewer showed no change in attitude as a result of Stan's challenge, but wrote a few notes and moved on by asking indifferently, "What's your real name?"

Stan answered with silence.

The interviewer stood up and walked back toward his desk. "Would you like some coffee and donuts, Mr. A.U.? Or would you prefer milk with your donuts?"

"No, thank you."

"Are you sure? Aren't you hungry?"

It was nearly lunch, and Stan's stomach had begun to growl.

The interviewer returned with a plate of neatly arranged donuts. He stepped in between the chairs, passed the donuts back and forth in front of Stan's face, and said, "They're fresh. Made this morning. Are you sure you don't want a chocolate glazed one? They're my favorite. Take two. Help yourself."

Stan turned his head in disgust at the man's demeaning manner. He said, "No, thank you. I'll be eating lunch soon."

"Will you?"

The interviewer took the donuts away and came back with one for himself on a small paper plate and a mug of coffee. The mug he set on the floor beside his chair. After he chewed and swallowed a mouthful of donut, he said, "This is *my* lunch. I forgot to bring my tuna salad croissant today."

When his palate had been cleared by sips of coffee, he leaned forward slightly and said, "Tell me, Mr. A.U., have you ever been wronged by the government?"

"Yes."

"Well, you're not lying there. What did the government do to hurt you?"

Stan decided to throw back a little sarcasm and symbolism. Maybe the man would appreciate his own treatment. "It took away my chocolate glazed donuts, but the government did me a favor by, by breaking my addiction to them. Now, I can take them or leave them."

The man laughed a genuine laugh and then asked, "What about life before incarceration? Did the government ever wrong you?"

"Yes."

"Will you elaborate?" The man seemed to have abandoned his smarmy courtesy.

"I prefer not to."

"Do you have bitterness against the government?"

"I've been treated badly. But I'm trying to forgive." He tried not to think about his parents, all his in-laws, and Mindy, to not show the pain he suffered.

"Forgive? Then it must not have been all that bad—what the government did? If you can forgive, then the offense wasn't important. Or maybe it was important."

Stan decided he had better not attempt a response to this question. But he might try a diversion: "Who has hurt you in your life?" he said. "Would you like to talk about that?"

The interviewer chuckled. "Good try. But I've had a lot of experience talking with prisoners, some who are geniuses, and some psychotic, people much smarter than you. Actually, I would like to talk about who has hurt me. Maybe with you, but not right now. I have my job. One last question, Mr. A.U. How did you come to be in Brogan Federal Correctional Institution? What crime did you commit to be here?"

Stan would never answer this. Here is when he should become silent as he did when he began his long fast.

The interviewer watched attentively. He would not break the tension, withdraw the question, or move on. He settled into his chair preparing for a long wait, hoping Stan would blurt out

something—the secret that prison rulers had been so anxious to receive. Stan grew uncomfortable. The tension increased as silent minutes passed. The guard shifted his weight and sighed. The tick returned to the interviewer's eye. He tilted his head to the side and began to slowly massage the spasm with his fingertips. He got up to refill his coffee and returned to his chair.

"May I go?" Stan said wearily. "Isn't the interview over?"

It was the interviewer's turn to not answer. Stan wanted to jump up and leave, or at least walk around the room and look out the window, but he didn't want to show weakness.

"May I leave now?"

No answer. The steady, patient, twitching stare of the interviewer was becoming nerve-wracking. Stan thought about shutting his eyes and trying to sleep, but he knew it would be futile. He closed his eyes and prayed. More minutes ticked off, and a gentle voice came to him, a voice seeming to have merged with his own face and head as if there was no space between him and the speaker.

"What crime did you commit? Or, let me rephrase . . . of what were you accused?"

Stan already had proven he wouldn't give this information, and so he didn't think the interviewer expected an answer, but only wished to prod him to see his response, to see if Stan would explode, displaying violent tendencies. Or maybe he envisioned the glory of cracking the indestructible A.U. Considering this, an idea came to Stan. He cleared his throat and said slowly, with pauses between the words, "I think I'm ready to confess."

The interviewer sat forward in his chair with avid, intense interest and said, "Oh?" He leaned down, took up his coffee mug, and began sipping while watching Stan over the top. He could barely suppress his eagerness.

"I . . . I admit," Stan stuttered. "You were . . . correct. I actually was . . . am, precariously nor . . . normal. It gah, got the best of me."

The man burst out laughing and coffee sloshed from his mug. Not laughing now, he jumped up, looked down at the stained carpet, then at Stan and began laughing again. "Alright, alright," he gushed, "the interview's over. You can go."

Stan stood and turned to the door. The guard held it open and Stan had nearly gone out when the interviewer ordered: "Wait!" A guard put his hand on Stan's chest to stop him. Stan looked back, expecting to be called in for more questioning. This was part of the technique. The interviewer stroked his chin, his eye ticking, and he said, "*Sure* you don't want a donut?"

Stan did not reply, but walked from the office. The guard let him pass. The door closed behind Stan and he heard loud cackling from within.

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As Stan walked to his cell, he felt exhausted, but satisfied he had won a victory and that his conditions would soon be improving. The guard, who was not Albert, opened the cell door, and to Stan's horror, he found two other inmates in his space. The guard said, "Get in!" and gave Stan a shove in the back. He tripped inside and the door slammed and locked.

There was no place for him to be. He felt invaded, violated. For months Stan had had his own home and it had been robbed. His room stank of foreign sweat and rank tobacco smoke. The men were sitting on his bed puffing cigarettes. One of them, the larger of the two, struggled to his feet and slugged Stan in the stomach. Stan grunted and grimaced in agony, doubled up, and sank to the floor. The man laughed and bounced back onto the bed, messing up the card game. The other prisoner stood up and delivered a fierce, indiscriminate kick at Stan. It did not hurt because the blow impacted an ankle, a hand, and his hip, and was diffused; but the meaning was clear. These men were criminals, not political prisoners, and they had been placed in maximum because they had committed horrible crimes. Stan shrank into the corner near the door. He was angry and afraid—there was no escape. The men now ignored him and engaged in meaningless, coarse, and brutal banter. He could not easily understand their words. Stan feared they would soon become bored with their card game and turn to him for more diversion. He wanted to pound on the door and cry for help, but the men would beat him if he disturbed them.

Where was Albert? Wouldn't he be bringing lunch? Stan looked around the cell. Lunch had come while he was out, and

the men had already gobbled their meals and his. Maybe Albert would bring supper. Stan cowered in the corner.

Albert did not bring supper, but two guards Stan did not know. Stan thought to ask if one would carry a message to Mercer, except she already had gone home for the day. With a guard still in the cell, Stan stood up and furtively glanced at the other men. They were busy eating. He whispered to the guard, "Get me out of here. These men might kill me."

The guard's face took on a disquieting expression replicating the look of the prisoners. "These men? If all they do is kill you, you'll be lucky. But take this and jump them. There's not enough room for everyone." He gave Stan a folded lock-blade knife and said, "Fifty bucks."

Stan held it close to his body, shielding it from the men's view, and he felt the weight. "I don't have any money," he said.

"Pay me later."

Stan was tempted to keep it, but his fear said that the men might stab him with the knife. He gave it back saying, "No. I can't." And immediately he felt relieved he had not accepted the instrument of violence. Stan had committed to following Christ's way, and how could he give it up now?

The guard asked, "You want some pills?" Stan said nothing.

"Suit yourself," the guard said and left.

Stan turned to his roommates. They had already split his supper between them: the larger one wolfing the meat dish and fruit dessert, and the other his bread and fried potatoes. That left the vegetable, which today was succotash—a mixture of lima beans, carrots, and corn. Stan ate those from his tray with his fingers, and later on, when the other trays were cast near him, he ate the vegetables from them as well, those that had not been scattered on the floor. He almost wished he had taken the interviewer's donuts.

For the remainder of the evening, Stan sat in the corner, afraid to say or do anything. The other men ignored him and played their card game. Both, apparently, had been kept in segregated cells for months, or years, as they said, more or less, and they enjoyed socializing with one another. Stan was relieved to be left alone, and yet he did not know what night would bring. Near the time for lights-out, a guard—not the one who brought

dinner—came distributing medications. The men gulped theirs. The guard asked if Stan wanted a sleeping drug, and Stan said quietly, "Absolutely not. Please, let me out of here." The guard uneasily looked at the prisoners and back to Stan, then shook his head. "Sorry."

"Well then, take the trays, okay?"

Stan gave the trays to the guard who set them on the floor in the corridor.

The smaller prisoner shouted, "Hey, can we get a bucking TV in here?"

The guard closed and locked the door without another word.

Medications began taking effect and the criminals settled down to sleep. The larger one had claimed Stan's bed and the other sprawled on the floor on Stan's blanket for a mattress. He wanted his head near the door, and he ordered Stan to move to the commode, which smelled bad, the criminals not having aimed well. Stan mopped up with dry toilet paper, then wet, and dry again. He squeezed into the corner between the commode and the wall, which was the only available space if he did not want to lie on the floor beside the other prisoner, a thing the latter would certainly not tolerate. Even so, there would hardly be room, and it would not be safe either. He shuddered at the thought of the perversions this person might attempt in a half-conscious state. Stan could not sleep sitting on the commode; he would fall off. The tight corner would have to do.

Stan dozed, fading out of and into wary consciousness, and shifted from one unbearable position to the other. He fell hard asleep for an hour and woke to sounds of insane quarreling. Stan's cramped body pained him and his arm was dead asleep, hanging from his shoulder, lifeless. He moved and felt the muscles tingle with sharp needles of returning sensation. The quarreling between his roommates grew louder. They were arguing about the bed.

"We agreed to take turns, and tonight's my damned night. I was sleeping, you bastard."

"I can't sleep on this humping floor and I changed my mind. I want my turn now."

Stan stood up in the commode corner to be able to dodge anything coming his way.

Suddenly the larger man struck out with a powerful blow, but the smaller man ducked and slid against the door with his back toward it. The larger man grabbed, and the smaller smashed him in the face with his fist. The larger blinked and staggered backwards, nearly tripping over the commode onto Stan, but he made no other signs he had been hurt. Never taking his eye off the other man, the larger stalked forward inch by inch with his hands out ready for a grab.

The smaller man glared coldly. His voice contained no fear, and almost admiration when he said, "I heard you killed Budge with your bare hands. You can have the slutting bed if you want. I'll take it tomorrow, like we said."

"Too late. I don't want the bed. I want to suck out your ghost. I want to eat your flesh and drink your blood."

The larger man lunged at the other, who dodged sideways again. The larger man made another lunge and grasped the smaller around the throat. The smaller man began gurgling and gasping, thrashing wildly, and tried to gouge the larger man's eyes with his fingers. Stan did not think. He did not consider that the other man was stronger than he, that his own left arm might be numb, or that his shoulder injury hindered him. Focusing strength and concentration, he suddenly seized the large man around the chest from behind, pinning the man's arms down and locking his own hand over his own wrist. At the same moment that Stan grabbed, the smaller man dug his fingernails into the larger man's face, so that with the combined defense, the larger man released the smaller man's neck. Stan squeezed with all his might. The larger man howled and struggled to free himself, but Stan did not let go. His own strength astounded him, or else it was that the other man was weaker than he had supposed. The larger man arched his back and tried to jerk his arms free. He flung back his head to butt Stan in the forehead, but barely made contact. Stan gathered his strength to wrest the man to the ground, and at the instant that he lifted, the man threw himself backwards. Locked together, they toppled with more energy than Stan expected. As Stan had pulled, he tried to twist the man's body so that when he fell, Stan would land on top. They came down sideways. Stan's head brushed and scraped down the wall, but the other man's head hit the commode with a

crunch and a grinding snap. The man's body went limp. Stan extricated himself from being pinned against the wall, and if his opponent was alive, he was badly hurt. While the smaller man huddled in the corner breathing hard and feeling his throat, Stan banged on the door and shouted. Guards hurriedly unlocked the door, and Stan said, "He needs help!"

Emergency medical personnel came quickly. Stan and the other prisoner watched from the corridor outside the cell. The injured prisoner was not dead, but seemed to have suffered a serious concussion. His neck might be broken, too. They took him away strapped on a gurney and chained. They examined the smaller prisoner's throat; he would be bruised and sore, but otherwise all right.

A guard supervisor came by toward the end of the hubbub and said smartly that he would begin an investigation in the morning, but asked, "Tell me what basically happened."

Stan said simply, "The injured man tried to kill this other prisoner. We wrestled and fell, and he hit the commode."

The supervisor went into the cell and looked around. Seeming to be satisfied, he came out and said, "There's no weapon here to cause this kind of head and neck damage. Your commode account seems likely, but we'll want to talk more anyway. Three men in this cell and two of them psychopathic murderers! Someone in Admin has lost his damned mind."

In the presence of someone sympathetic, Stan said, "You'd better interview the guard who brought dinner last night."

The supervisor said, "Huh?"

"You might want to question the guard who brought us dinner. He's hustling knives."

"Huh? I'll . . . look into it."

They locked Stan and the other prisoner back into their cell. It grew quiet. Sunrise outside would be hours away. Stan picked up the blankets that had been kicked around the room.

The small prisoner said, "You saved my life."

"Yeah," Stan answered, too tired to say anything else.

"Nobody's done anything for me, man," he said to Stan. "You take the bed."

"No. You have it. I'll be fine on the floor. It'll be paradise compared to the toilet."

The other prisoner did not argue, but tucked himself in and lit a cigarette. "Smoke?"

"No. Thanks." Stan settled onto the floor, making his slippers into a pillow.

"My name's Barnes."

Stan did not answer. He did not want to respond, but stared at the ceiling. Reconsidering, he said, "I'll talk to you in the morning, okay? I want to sleep."

The other man puffed heavily, blew long into the air, and then rubbed the cigarette out on the side of the commode. "Who are you?" he asked.

Nearly asleep already, Stan mumbled, "Me? Nobody."

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Stan did not sleep long. The other prisoner had fallen into a noisy snoring slumber, assuring Stan that it would be safe enough to relax his guard, but his body was full of adrenaline and his thoughts were whirling around. Day dawned over the exterior walls of the prison and he managed to sleep again, but determined himself to wake if the snoring ceased. His mind floated placidly between dreams and awareness until breakfast arrived, much later than usual.

When Albert entered with trays, he halted—dismay riveted on his face—when he saw Stan's roommate and smelled the forbidden tobacco smoke. He apologized to Stan with facial expressions and a shake of the head, but Barnes did not notice.

Stan said, "It's okay, but how about a new domicile for tonight?" and Albert hurried away.

The prisoner Barnes showed no overt signs of being a pathological murderer. This was more frightening than if saliva were seeping down his chin, or if his head were canted eerily when he spoke, or if he were arguing with voices in his head. Surely, there must be a clue to show that this man was devoid of natural reserve against slaying his own kind. He ate his oatmeal, toast, and eggs quietly and with relish. Stan watched him and tried not to be seen watching.

Then without warning, Barnes looked into Stan's eyes. Barnes' eyes were dark brown, with dilated black pupils. Stan felt as if he were spinning into a bottomless pit and tore his own

eyes away. The look was like what Stan had seen in a dog once when he was a child. Neighbors who rented the house next door kept a medium-sized, muscular dog chained. It had a broad, boney head. When they went away, they never left the dog food or water. The dog never whined or barked. One day it broke the chain and attacked a neighbor boy who later died from his injuries. Stan had watched while they took the dog away in a cage on a truck. The eleven-year-old Stan approached the cage and poked the dog with a stick through the wire. The dog regarded him coldly. He had no natural restraints; they had been bred out of him, beginning generations back. The dog neither hated nor loved; it killed because it had been genetically selected to kill, and it killed because its instinct had been triggered. Could this be Barnes?

Barnes moved his gaze down to the food tray. He stopped eating, put the tray aside, and began meticulously cleaning his left-hand fingernails with the fingernails of his right. Stan continued to observe and consider. He tried to imagine what it might be like to be inside this other person's mind, and suddenly he felt afraid, because he remembered the terrible thoughts that seemed at times to take possession of him. When on the freeway barreling at 70 miles per hour: Turn the van into the concrete pier. While on a hike: Throw the child off the cliff. When washing dishes: Stab the person beside you. While standing near a police officer: Grab his gun and shoot him. Standing next to an attractive woman: Grab her breasts and kiss her.

Stan shuddered and Barnes looked up at him. When these thoughts had come into his mind, Stan had always shoved them away, but afterwards the fact that he had them at all troubled him. Were they common in other people? Did others have these impulses that revealed only a translucent veil between a "normal" peace-loving person and a perverse serial killer?

Under the pressure of these impulses, as long as he allowed them to disturb him, they were hard to drive from his head. He had learned that this was a trap, and rather than worry, he learned to curse them, saying "Go to hell" and then go about his business. But what about Barnes? Did he have any ability to send those satanic thoughts back from where they came?

What steps had Barnes taken into that abysmal hole of inhumanity where the survival instinct and the instincts to reproduce joined into twisted union, where he derived pleasure from what is most abhorrent? Stan did not know this for certain about Barnes, but he guessed; there was more than killing in his background. Once, Barnes had been a small baby, somebody's child, someone's little boy. The heartless cruelty began then. The yielding to the impulses, beginning with the almost harmless and progressing without hindrance until he acted under compulsion of prolonged practice. But the boy was still there, the little boy who once was innocent. He looked at Barnes and tried to think of him this way, as he thought of his own son somewhere, and he pitied the man.

Barnes finished breakfast, and his cold eyes searched the room's walls and ceiling with the ceaseless motion of a caged animal seeking an escape, an escape that a rational being would know was impossible. He seemed to have completely forgotten the attack of the night before. He never thought of asking forgiveness for kicking Stan.

Stan ached for the secret to returning Barnes to humanity. He remembered his high-flying idealism about literature transforming culture. He doubted that Barnes had ever read a book, but he decided to ask. This couldn't possibly provoke the killing instinct.

"What's your favorite book?" he asked.

Barnes said, "You're stupid joking. I can't read."

"What's your favorite story, then?"

"You don't want my stories. I don't have favorites." He rocked his body a little, and again Stan shuddered when he saw emptiness behind those dark eyes. The stories Barnes thought of were killings.

Stan feared this might anger Barnes, but he decided to try. Without introduction he began telling *The Three Bears*, a story his mother had often told him. Barnes stopped rocking, but continued scanning the room. Stan could not tell if he was listening. In the middle of the story, Stan began wondering what fantasy Barnes might add to the tale, but he kept on. When he finished, he waited for a reaction, but there wasn't any, and so he launched into another childhood story. He kept telling stories,

and the beast before him glided his eyes over the room. Stan narrated the Christmas story about baby Jesus.

Maybe Barnes was listening. He had stopped moving his eyes and was staring at the wall in front of him, hardly blinking. He did not complain or interrupt. As Stan told these stories, he realized that he was trying to give Barnes what childhood he could. Barnes might be moved by this gentleness and cry for what he had lost or never had.

No one came to investigate the fight and the storytelling continued uninterrupted all morning.

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Deputy Superintendent Kiplinger had that same morning glanced at the psychologist's report, pursed his lips, and initialed the order to release the prisoner A.U. into medium custody. Kiplinger knew this prisoner as one who had caused him trouble, but he harbored no personal resentment. He had a lot to think about. It was a standard matter taking a few seconds of his day.

Albert and Mercer arrived before noon to escort Stan into the medium section. Stan hesitated before walking from the cell.

"Maybe I can come back and tell you some more stories," he said to Barnes.

"That'd be all right."

"Or I could teach you to read."

"You can't. There's no time."

Stan patted Barnes on the shoulder and said, "We'll see. Be good. I'll be back, if I can."

The corridor was empty except for the three of them. Mercer took Stan's arm and said, "I'm so sorry about what happened. We received a load of new prisoners yesterday against the superintendent's orders, and Kiplinger crowded some of our spaces. We're storing people in hallways and gyms. The maximum cells were in high demand, and Kiplinger commanded that they be doubled and tripled up until we could find other solutions. You know, there's a fight for control between him and the superintendent, and they each have support higher up. I . . . I hear you had an eventful night."

"That's true."

Mercer let his arm go and took hold of her own elbows and sighed. "I'm so glad you survived. You have no idea of those men's records."

"I read their faces."

"What did you mean about teaching that inmate to read?"

"He seems intelligent enough; he just needs time and patience."

"He doesn't have time. He's scheduled to die by lethal injection next week."

"It can't be." Stan abruptly stopped walking.

"I'm sorry, but it's so."

"I wonder if you might arrange for me to see him."

"That's impossible."

"Are you sure?"

"*Yes.* But . . . I'll see what can be done."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll tell you later," Mercer said. "Anyway, I'm glad you survived that ordeal."

As the three resumed walking, Mercer and Albert seemed excited about something, but Stan did not think to ask why.

They moved through the maximum-security complex into an enclosed outdoor walkway that led to another building, one comprised of self-contained suites each made up of a common dayroom and cells facing the center, small cells holding four or more men each, though they were designed for only two. They passed through an electrically controlled metal and glass door into the common room of one of the suites. When Stan entered, several men rose at once and came near. The air smelled clean. Natural light beamed in from narrow horizontal windows against the ceiling. Stan could see blue sky. Mercer took Stan's arm again and whispered in his ear loud enough for the nearest men to hear. "Mr. Timmons. Welcome to freedom."

Wearing a puzzled expression, he looked at her.

"Let me introduce you." She indicated around the circle, giving the name—the prison name—of each man. In turn, they stepped forward and shook Stan's hand, and each respectfully said a couple words of gratitude, admiration, or welcome. Stan recognized two men who had been in the transport truck with

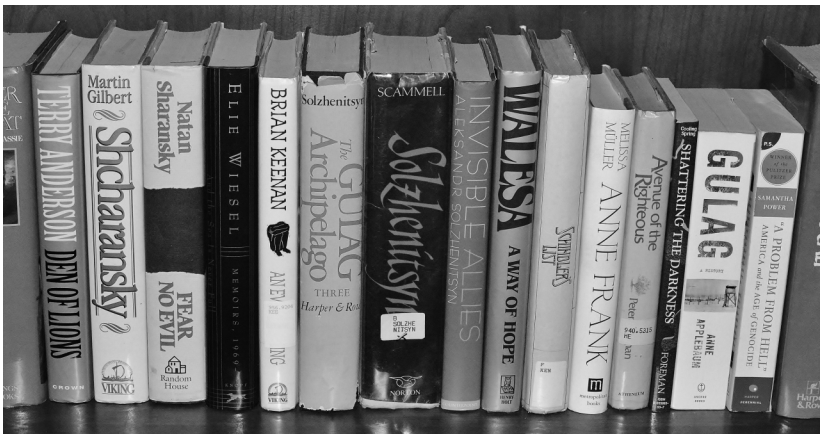
him when he first came to the prison. One of them was Grey, who approached last and embraced him.

After Grey stepped back, he said, "You'll be pleased with what you find at Brogan. The Assembly has flourished here, except it's not so much an organization as a spontaneous movement. We don't control the prison, though. There's a power struggle going on, and you've been caught in it. You don't know, do you, that the country verges on civil war? But a war unlike anything we have seen in history. There are no battle lines; rather, the divisions cut across government agencies, branches of the military, states, neighborhoods, families, private corporations, political parties, and even this prison. We have friends and enemies throughout the compound, and some who are neutral, but the important thing for us is this: The government in power thinks it runs the prison, but it doesn't, not entirely. We're safe as long as it thinks it's in charge here."

Grey held his arms out from his side and opened his palms to signify the room, everyone in it, and perhaps even the surrounding countryside. "This suite . . . all of us. We are all friends and of one mind and purpose. And we're so glad to have you with us again at last!"

To Stan's complete amazement, the men somberly applauded, and he did what he had not done since he was a teenager.

He blushed.




***About or by prisoners.***

*I find myself in a house that is full of furniture arranged in an orderly fashion, lamps on tables, pots and pans hanging on the kitchen wall. Lacy window curtains ruffle with a breeze blowing in. The colors are bright, with yellow and red. I walk into the kitchen and try to figure out where I am. There are people in the house, but not in the rooms I have been in. I walk down a step into a pantry with cupboards and a grimy refrigerator. I yell, "Will someone please clean this refrigerator?" I realize that it is an antique. No one answers. I walk out a door and down steps. The sun lowers ahead in the west, telling an hour until darkness, or less. Away from the house is a barn. Looking into the door I can see, as if bizarre corpses swinging by their necks, dozens of fantastical farm machinery parts suspended from the joists. Every part is black, with hoses, pipes, and rods poking out and looping around to the main body—and there are wheels. I push through and leave them swinging behind me. Out the back door there is a field full of dead machinery. Suddenly, the sky turns dark, and I am scared and lost. Blind! I turn around and trip along the side of the barn. I call out "Hello! Hello!" hoping someone will hear. Every so often I call "Help." I am embarrassed. Eventually, by going towards light, I make it to the house and into a brightly lit basement. A young man is working on a carpentry project. He is cheerful and unworried. I think he might be my child . . . I am not sure. But he knows me. I realize that I am an old man. I ask, "Have I had a stroke?" He says, "Yes, your left arm was paralyzed, but you're recovering." I wiggle the fingers of my upturned hands. I ask him, "Have I asked this before?" and he nods* yes. *I say, "I don't remember anything." He smiles as if he knows this already, as if I have said this before on many occasions.*

**–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons**

## Chapter 29
# Gathering Strength

The following days were for Stan like moving into a new dorm at college. Meeting new friends, exploring a new environment, looking forward to an exciting routine with a job and fascinating classes—all would have been entirely enjoyable except that Stan and his companions had serious work to conduct both in evaluating the course of civil conflicts outside and in governing their prison affairs.

Stan found himself propelled into a thriving spiritual community of men, a cheerful, determined monastic society of patriots and resistors mixed with a minority of regular criminals, most of whom had been excluded from knowledge of the political organization that was the medium and substance of the culture around them. Conditions remained hard, but compared to what Stan had in solitary, they were lavish. He reveled in sunshine, wind, regular clean underwear, and company. Other compound leaders greeted Stan in the cafeteria and elsewhere, though they did not know who he was, exactly. They had heard only that he had been freed from isolation and that he nearly died from starvation. Only his suite members knew his real identity.

After a weekend of adjustment, Stan attended to a matter he had begun just prior to being released into medium. With funds given by suitemates, he had placed an order of colorful children's books from a wholesale outlet in Boise and had it shipped overnight to the prison. The books arrived four days later, and the box had been battered and torn, according to Albert, but the books themselves were intact. With permission from prison authorities, and at the request of Barnes, Stan took the books to the condemned man on the Tuesday before his Thursday execution. They met in a small anteroom near Stan's old cell block, which, as Albert explained, was in the Death Row for this facility. No one had ever said this to Stan before, not even Mercer. With Albert looking on from across the room,

Stan and Barnes sat on a vinyl couch while Stan read through the books. Barnes' chilling eyes roved over the illustrations, and he listened intently, never making a sound, except to say at the end of a book, "This was a good one," or "Read it again." Once or twice, Stan began to turn a page and Barnes would reach out and stop his hand, and slowly, but with irresistible strength, turn the page back so that he could look at the picture longer.

Stan tried to teach Barnes to read a few words, but Barnes showed no interest; nor did he appear to care that he would soon be put to death. Stan tried to probe the condemned man's feelings about dying and found that he had none. Barnes expressed no more interest in his impending death than he had in his victims' deaths. On Stan's last visit, when Albert said "You must leave now," Stan stacked the books to take them away.

Barnes put his hands on the stack and said, "I want to keep them." Stan looked to Albert, who nodded that this would be all right.

Stan paused before the door to say goodbye, but Barnes was absorbed in a book. Showing no emotion, he only looked at the book and turned a page. Stan went to see about making sure a chaplain visited Barnes before the end, someone who might find a way to reach through to his human spirit, if he still had one.

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The whole prison knew the day—September 26—and hour—6:00 p.m.—of the execution, and the atmosphere was tense, in particular because of the recurring rumor sweeping again through the criminal population. The rumor said mass exterminations were about to begin. To calm things, Assembly people stifled the rumors with counter-rumors that there "might" soon be an amnesty and release of political prisoners, which would relieve the over population strain, and the criminals began inventing optimistic schemes of becoming political. Conflicting feelings rose, sank, and washed back and forth through the prison that day like tides and waves of the sea, but Stan only felt sad and depressed.

When he later ran into Mercer in a crowded corridor, he asked her what last words Barnes had said before the execution.

"Nothing," she said. "He didn't say anything."

"Did he make any last requests?"

"You don't want to know."

"Yeah, I do."

"He asked for a television."

At the moment, Stan felt more flattened by this than by the ruin that was the man's life. He asked Mercer, "I remember you mentioned some unlikely idea about how I could go see Barnes with the books. What did you do?"

She said, "I told Kiplinger you were a comedian."

"That was a lie, wasn't it?"

"No. He thought it was a joke. He likes jokes," she said and walked away.

A letter from Lydia arrived soon afterwards, and this cheered him a little.

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Wisely, Grey waited until Stan adjusted to life in company of people before he spoke to him more about the situation in the country. One evening early in October, when the prisoners had settled down to watch movies or read or write letters, Grey took Stan aside in the common room. They set up a chessboard and a suite member sat with them to kibitz (to watch the door as a sentry), but the players' minds were not in the game.

Staring down at the board and keeping his head straight ahead, Grey began in a quiet voice. "Let me draw you a picture. On one layer, life goes on as normal. People work, children attend school, people get married and take vacations. But all this is affected by depressed economic conditions, political strife, wrestling for power, violent episodes increasing in frequency and scale, and an open war of words. The civilian courts have nearly ceased functioning, and in places, vigilante groups and military or police courts have arisen. There are numerous factions, and they're partly geographical. Old alliances have broken forever, though some small parties have remained intact. As we speak, battle lines are shifting, and certain agencies are consolidating and taking sides. In case you have not heard, what we called the Government in Power has lost control. It holds parts of certain government branches, but we hold others. We have not quite openly claimed power, not yet. The military is

subdivided. Elements and units are with us, some with the GiP, and others operate independently from both sides, but are standing by to see which side prevails. Much of the armed conflict now is within military units as they struggle to choose a side. Soldiers have been killed and overall the outcome is uncertain. This is a general portrait, and I'll fill in details later, as needed."

Stan leaned forward as if to make a chess move out of turn, but really indicating that he had a question, and Grey let him interrupt. "You said soldiers have been killed?"

Grey thought a minute, deciding what story to tell him. "There have been a few skirmishes within regular military. This one was within an Army National Guard unit in Kentucky, near Lexington. It was bad. Officers loyal to the GiP occupied the armory to defend it. This particular armory contained hefty weaponry and armored vehicles. The problem was that a Central American based-gang had been sending squads into rural areas raiding for food and gasoline—and they were committing rapes along the way—but National Guard officers weren't doing anything to stop this. Some of the officers—led by an enterprising lieutenant, actually—had been discontented with the GiP; they gathered up local people who were armed with hunting rifles and paramilitary weapons from their private collections. In the middle of the night, they attacked and took the armory. It was bloody. Casualties were shocking on both sides, and many died from their wounds, because the hospitals in the area couldn't handle the extra load, and electricity was sporadic. Some of the GiP opponents who attacked the armory were women—girls who had been raped by the foreign gangs. That's what I was told. We have yet to confirm this part of the story. There were women; we know that for sure.

"And then with the extra armaments, they began searching for the pillaging squads."

Stan leaned back in his chair and sighed deeply. "Is it as bad as that everywhere?"

"No, but some places are worse. We don't even know what's happening in some of the large cities. Most people are fine, but confused. The worst is we fear an Islamic terror attack. I mean, we are vulnerable. It may have already taken place, and we just

haven't heard. Rumors fly constantly. We have been in communication with our Middle Eastern friends, asking them to help us. But let me finish summarizing the military situation.

"I mentioned geography. We hold territory across the South and Midwest and some areas of the East Coast. There's a band reaching east of the Cascade Mountains, with a spur into northern California. But there are no fixed borders. Mostly it turns upon the sympathy of the people. This prison, while within territory that identifies with us, remains GiP-controlled because it's federal. We have to be cautious, since there is nothing yet to stop the GiP from annihilating us."

"Annihilating us?" Stan said.

"Yes."

Grey partly covered his mouth with his hand and his voice diminished to the barest whisper: "Nothing to stop them but an exceptional defense we hope to possess. You absolutely may not discuss this with anyone. Understood? We intend to seize a number of nuclear missiles in the western states. Strength will come in their deterrence value. Frankly, I do not believe that we could or should use them, but the GiP won't know that right away. The GiP could eventually call our bluff."

"Then our strength is illusionary, unless it's our mercy," Stan said as if to himself. "Can we both bluff and use them?"

Grey looked at him strangely, with something like a higher respect, and said hesitantly, "If, under the most extreme conditions, we select a purely military target, one with deterministic importance."

Grey finally moved a chess piece.

Stan paused a long while before saying, "Then we won't know if we should use the weapon until the threat arrives. We should develop a list of those possible threats."

"Yes . . . That would be necessary, and difficult. And did I mention that conflict and strife are spreading throughout the world? It's been ugly here, but in some countries it is beyond imagination. There are hideous little wars with massacres and starvation, and punitive rape. It's indescribable. Starving children covered by swarming flies. Environmental degradation and disease in places you wouldn't expect, such as in Europe.

The world has notched down in civility. It's a churning sea with few safe islands.

"But this war in the U.S. could be likened to our chess game. In reality there's not much action, not yet, but rather a mind-breaking struggle of positioning, moves, and counter-moves, and traps set and broken, and pieces captured or promoted—and at this place in time, we have equality. As I said, we have captured pieces, as have they. Blood has been spilt in military conflict in some places. We hold squares strongly, as do they. But in large part, the board and the game are up for grabs. I don't need to tell you what's at stake. Your own experience screams the truth. This is not merely a battle between one political entity or philosophy and another, both equal in moral status. It's a cliché, but a true cliché: This is a battle of good against evil."

Stan frowned. He wanted to better understand the mindset of those holding onto the GiP. "The GiP is broken, yes, but what do its leaders think? Is there talk of negotiating?"

"No talk of negotiation," Grey said with irritation. "For the GiP it has come to this: a senseless lust for power. The GiP is an addict who surrenders everything good and beautiful to satisfy his hunger. They say, and probably believe, that they are pursuing the good, but they're deluded."

For a momentary rest, Grey stopped talking. The men studied the chessboard. It was not a strong game for either of them. Grey's speech had distracted their concentration, and they saw glaring errors and a rook-queen forking opportunity for Stan, whose move it was next.

"Shall we call a draw?" Stan asked.

"Yes, but let's play on naturally. We are not unobserved."

Stan looked up and saw an unknown guard in the suite.

"He just came in," the kibitzer said.

They finished playing the game without further talking. Stan had superior forces, but could not coordinate his material to stop a pawn, which Grey advanced and promoted to queen. Checkmate soon followed.

"Don't worry," Grey said. "We've been playing in the suite for months. I'll teach you to play better."

The guard slowly looped through the suite several times and then departed.

"As I was saying," Grey resumed, "we have on our side people who had been staunch philosophical opponents. But when conditions worsened and the government began to oppress and treat people as less than human, those enemies perceived where the true conflict lay, and they defected from the GiP. I was one of those defectors, and my leanings were progressive, as you know. Likewise, many friends deserted us. We even have open homosexuals—a few—who have sided with us, but they are not in leadership positions or in places of high trust. We generally encourage them to change or be chaste—or at least be discreet. On the other hand, some who lean to the politically right spectrum became our worst enemies by supporting the suspension of basic human rights in the name of 'Authority' and 'Order.' Purely looking at individuals, the shifts seemed random and arbitrary. Before these troubles, we had no inkling of knowing friend from foe. It was affliction and adversity that brought out the true characters of men and women."

"You only discover your true friends in the foxhole."

"Exactly. Your father-in-law used to put it that way."

The men agreed to another match and arranged the pieces.

"What might be a revelation to you, Stan, is that Brogan is a nerve center for the true government of the United States. An oasis protected from upheaval and anarchy reigning all around. We are the headquarters, the capitol, of a government in internal exile. Not an elected government—not yet—but provisional. How did we come here? At first it was by the accidental fact that some of the earliest prisoners arriving at Brogan had been undetected members of the Assembly. They created a ped, a naturally forming aggregate, and they waited. This was during the year you were with the Hutterites. What ignited a rebuilding of the Assembly was when you arrived with a dozen other men, myself included, and we began our hunger strike. Word went all over the country and overseas through the underground, and there began an extraordinary effort to infiltrate the prison and take control. This was a perfect environment. We needed buildings and a budget. The government in power, while making financial incisions at many other points, at the same time placed prisons at a high funding priority. We needed security and privacy. We needed cover, and the prison gave us those

necessities. Ironically, the GiP provided us resources we needed and sent us talented recruits in the way of new prisoners. During your half a year in solitary, we built, solidified, and extended the network.

"Some command and control is exercised from overseas, but this location is the present center. And what might be most shocking to you, Stan, is that you have emerged as a national leader. Because your father-in-law was the Assembly's creative architect, and he was so much respected and loved, his mantle—whether you like it or not—his mantle fell on your shoulders, his only known—known so far—surviving relation. And naturally, you realize that your writing and our publishing of your work has raised you before the people. At this stage, the information war and the contest for hearts is the most significant."

Stan began a feeble protest, but Grey waved it away. "It doesn't matter how you feel; this is reality. You don't really have any choice. I know you probably were going to say you are not skilled or smart enough, and you'd be absolutely right. What counts is strength of character. Men in this room and this compound, and women here too, possess brilliant minds, as good as any in the world, maybe. We will advise you from here on. We're building satellite links to be in touch with other nations and our people elsewhere, and to broadcast your speeches. There's a groundswell of calls, and not artificially induced, but calls from the earth itself, a groaning of the ordinary people of this land, for you to assume the country's leadership. Who else do they have? As with any crisis, people need a person to follow. Of course, you are only a figurehead, but the position is important. Someday, if order and rightness are restored, you may decide to run for election. But let's put the thought of elections aside, because they're presently unrealistic. We have work to accomplish, and the fact remains: You are the presumed leader of the true government of the United States, Underground. As things are, here and elsewhere, others are actually running the show, and your leadership is purely inspirational, but right now, that's what people need."

After abandoning the pretense of playing chess, they talked late into the night. Stan asked question after question. He learned what military units were under the direction of the

Assembly at Brogan—a strange thought to him—or which units soon would be linked to their command when they perfected satellite communications, and who the leading generals and commanders were. At the moment, military leaders acted independently and in an uncoordinated fashion. Better structure and the communication system would come within the next months, hopefully, Grey said. They were arranging for the hardware components to be smuggled into the prison, packed along with parts for the electronics labor program.

As days passed, Stan studied pictures of the military people, in case he should meet them. He paid especial attention to generals and admirals, and skimmed over the lower ranking officers. To the best of his ability, he learned facts and information about happenings and persons from around the world. It was a process of development into a person capable of holding the position to which he had been elevated. As Grey said, they would not govern immediately; it would happen gradually, with one area at a time coming under their review and oversight.

Always Stan asked that inquiries about his children's whereabouts and welfare be sent out, and nothing came back except apologies and the message "We don't know."

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While all this went on, Stan continued the existence of a regular inmate. He began a cooking class, not so much because he wanted to learn, but as to eat better. He started working four hours a day in the printing shop, bundling and packing Forest Service and other government agency posters for shipping—which attested to a certain normalcy continuing in the country despite the extreme tensions, though much of the printing was GiP propaganda; and he played soccer or basketball in the afternoons. In the evening, with his physical energy dissipated and body relaxed, he concentrated on writing. Stan wrote every day, with a goal of an article per week. In the mornings, the men in his suite briefed him on daily events in the prison and outside, and they guided and edited his compositions. Even without the satellite network in place, he was more aware of happenings in the world than average people living on the outside. Stan also

wrote in the small hours when he could not sleep, when he awoke without knowing the reason why.

Because the necessity for her protective role was lessened, Stan did not often see Mercer. As more days passed, she updated him on her family situation and improving relations with her husband, and Stan made helpful suggestions. Since Mercer had dropped from his communication loop, no longer passing letters between him and Lydia, and since so much had been settled in his prison life, Stan was surprised on a Friday in mid-November when she sent word that she needed to see him. No longer was Albert required to escort Stan, but another guard accompanied him to her office.

She greeted him formally, which suggested something might be amiss, and she said, "You have a visitor waiting." To avoid betraying any friends, Stan had not met the prison's requirement that he submit a list of potential visitors, and so he had not expected anyone, but he dared not ask questions.

"This visit is to be in person, face to face," Mercer said, "but remember it's supervised. Here's a list of the rules. Please read them over and sign, indicating you've received them."

His heart raced. *Who might this be?*

The guard led Stan to the visitation chamber of his section. There were two visitors, and they sat at a table with their backs to him, but Stan knew who they were by their costume: Lydia and her father, Henry. She stood up and turned. In her traditional mismatched-pattern Hutterite dress, and her hair woven away from her forehead, Lydia was the most beautiful creature he could ever imagine seeing. She wore a blue head covering. She smiled, and Stan sobbed out loud.

The guard's back absentmindedly—conveniently—turned, Stan immediately broke the rules and gave Lydia a clinging hug. For Stan, the All-There-Is, from the spinning of the electrons and the zipping of planet-piercing tachyons, to the incomprehensible break-neck expansion of the universe—all this ceased movement, and time itself, if time is real, halted in their pure embrace. But conventional reality asserted itself, and this moment of moments ended. Stan pulled away and heartily shook Henry's thick hand.

Stan then danced around to the other side of the table. He did dance, though he would have denied it, and took a seat opposite Lydia.

The guard, arbitrarily reasserting the regulations, said sternly, "No footsies under the table."

"May we hold hands?"

The guard turned his back again.

"Shall there be a wedding tomorrow?" Henry asked, going straight to business.

"You're kidding!"

"Why not?"

"I suppose so. Uh, yes!" Stan said. "Will the prison allow it?"

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Lydia and her father spent the night at a bed & breakfast in the nearby town that had originated the prison's name, Brogan.

Despite short notice, the prison allowed the wedding the following day, reluctantly, with fiercely divided opinions. Unknown to Stan and to Kiplinger, the proper papers had been filed in timely fashion in advance of the wedding. Mercer said it was her "present" to the couple. The superintendent gave permission, and Kiplinger had vehemently objected, saying, "Conditions do not permit prisoners to have troublesome liberties," and, "How can the marriage be legal when we don't know the groom's name?"

Chief among the problems created by a wedding was that the prison chapel housed thirty or so prisoners who would have to be temporarily vacated. This would have been only lightly inconvenient, but Kiplinger fired a protest to the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Kiplinger's protest was dismissed, and guidelines prevailed that had been set down long before the troubles began. A regular-duty chaplain, who accommodated requests from the bride's father as to Hutterite belief and custom, conducted the ceremony. Grey and Albert attended, and no one else besides Lydia's father. There was no music and no flowers. Lydia wore the same dress she had worn the day before. Secretly, she carried Stan's gold wedding ring on a string around her neck. Stan trimmed his beard and otherwise only wore standard prison blues, except they were washed and ironed. After the wedding

ceremony, the couple was allowed to sit together for two hours, all the while under the observation of Albert, who sat working a crossword puzzle behind a clear glass window in an adjoining room. The rules permitted them to hold hands and kiss briefly, and to sit close and put an arm around the shoulder, but no more. They did not press to stretch the rules. They spoke about farm work on the Alberta colony and life in prison, and they tickled each other and laughed.

Lydia and Henry left after the wedding, and it seemed to Stan as if they had never been there, because it had happened so quickly and was over.

Stan learned soon afterwards that on their way home, the two Hutterites had been arrested at the border, for no other reason than unspecified suspicions based on the prison visit and association with Stan, whom the GiP still regarded with mistrust because of his anonymity. This was Kiplinger's revenge. As soon as he could, Grey found out where they were held and he assured Stan that they were safe, for the present. They had not been formally charged and no trial seemed to be forthcoming, but they had been aggressively interrogated.

"They did well under their ordeal," Grey said to Stan, who knew that Grey was sparing alarming details because of what had happened to Mindy.

Subsequent to the arrival of this troubling news, Mercer found Stan returning to the suite from his work shift one day and said she had decided to return to Salem. "I want to be near my husband. He still hasn't found work. He seems broken and humble. I'm moving in with my parents—my daughter Vee and I will. They have a storage shed that they're clearing out for me. It's next to their house. It has a sink and a woodstove. Going to be cozy! We'll be in time for Thanksgiving."

"What will you do for income?"

"It could hardly be worse than it is. Did you know I haven't been paid in a month?"

"No. I'm surprised. No one told me."

"My boss told me they no longer had funds for my position. I volunteered to stay for as long as I could and now I'm nearly broke. But I probably should go anyway. You don't need me anymore, and I've heard that the micro-satellite dishes have been

installed now—some prison staff members assisted. You'll be able to instantly communicate with the world."

Stan took her hand and said, "Thank you for your help. I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you." She hugged him and turned to leave so that he would not see her tears.

Stan called out behind her. "Give your love to your husband."

"I'll try," she said and hastened around a corner of the corridor.

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The prison droned from the initiation of satellite transmissions to and from locations around the planet. Knowing when they began, and sensing the profound mood change of his colleagues and their intensified level of conversation, Stan could almost feel the electromagnetic waves vibrating beyond the thresholds of human perception.

Certain leaders kept handheld sized computers that were radio-linked to miniature transmitters hidden on the roofs of the buildings. The transmitters were hardwired into the prison's electrical system, but backed up by battery. Stan continued to learn about events. Despite the elaborate communication system, he still heard nearly nothing regarding Lydia and her father, and nothing about his children and sister. He prayed for them, but he was beyond worrying. He studied the issues and persevered through the long writing hours, and he exercised and put in time at the print shop.

All his life before prison, Stan had observed and listened and made notes, mental and on paper, or on silicon disks, about happenings around him; and he read other people's thoughts. Now, words flowed in a rushing stream from his own experience, and out of what he learned about resistance in jails, communities, and cities across the conflict-wasted landscape. Underground media specialists transmitted these writings piece by piece to a voracious readership. Stan began to see ordinary prisoners he did not know—regular criminals—repeat his words they had heard on state radio or television playing in the recreation rooms. The official GiP interpretation, carried in their sanctioned publications, slandered him and distorted his words, but Stan could read the truth between the lines, as could other

prison residents. They always handled official publications and news broadcasts with skepticism; but the underground news outlets flourished uncensored, hopefully, abetting people everywhere in understanding the truth.

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One day in December, Grey joined Stan at work cutting and packaging blank name tags so that they could talk.

"I have disturbing news," Grey said. "You know that the superintendent has been shielding us for quite some time. But he's just been fired. I mean, he's been removed because he didn't show sufficient loyalty to the GiP, and he was accused of misappropriating funds, a common weapon against independent thinking. The GiP was cutting back on the prison budget, and the truth was rather opposite to the charges, because money quietly poured in from outside of the GiP to maintain our levels. What brought the superintendent under suspicion was how well the prison was doing financially. And allowing your wedding was a camelback-breaking event. The superintendent was sent off without notice and Kiplinger was installed in his place. The super's gone into hiding. On the surface, this appears to be a tremendous setback for us, but in reality, it's a mixed blessing. For one thing, Kiplinger is no longer in charge of security. One of our men has taken his place! But on the other hand, Kiplinger's penchant for cruelty now has less restraint. If the GiP gives him an extreme order, no one here can stop him. While Kiplinger is in charge, we are always in danger of being uncovered and destroyed, or just destroyed out-of-hand. The best part is that while he's in place as superintendent, the federal GiP is convinced it's in control. It might leave us in peace. Kiplinger is both our reprieve and our potential destruction. There's a real threat of massacre here—of prisoners—but we have hope it can never be carried out because some guards and several administrators are sympathizers. More of them are seeing the GiP decay and give up any moral high ground it might have possessed."

Grey allowed Stan a minute to absorb this information.

"We are in a more precarious position than before," Stan said. "What can we do?"

"It is a delicate balance," Grey said gravely. "Meanwhile, we must not seem nervous and we will make a military provision for the worst possible scenario."

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Prison life deteriorated soon after Kiplinger assumed the top position. Since the civilian courts no longer gave oversight to the judicial system, the pace of carrying out executions quickened, until every day at least one Death Row prisoner was killed. The executions continued through the entire Christmas holidays. While prison regulations had been rigorously enforced under the previous superintendent with some humane anomalies, under Kiplinger they became ruthlessly applied as far as his power and knowledge extended. The Assembly called for an end to internal baseline rebellion/resistance so as not to provoke him further. Another effect of administration change: The food quality and amounts declined for the prisoners, which reflected the general austerity of conditions throughout the country. Christmas and New Year's were the bleakest anyone could remember.

Stan wished he had news about Lydia and Henry. No more letters came. Their sophisticated communications network brought news from around the world, but not from a few hundred miles north.

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Nearly a month passed, and eastern Oregon drifted deeper into winter. Snow lingered on the ground on consecutive crisp, windy days. The winds blew fiercely cold, and then the weather changed and the snow melted as an unusual rain pelted the white and brown world. At work early one day at the printing shop, Stan kept busy cutting paper stock and packing completed orders for shipping. He was in a hurry because a press operator had promised to teach him how to set up and operate one of the printing machines. Stan worked side-by-side with another prisoner, a convicted extortionist and murderer named Parker—not a political prisoner, but a criminal who had somewhat accidentally killed an adversary on federal property. He was a fellow who liked Stan and who maintained a large repertoire of

jokes; the two men always had amicable conversation, and Parker tried every new funny story with Stan. The room in which they worked was large with a high ceiling. The presses were arranged around the room, and about half of them currently were running, while a pressman closely attended each. Stan and his partner worked at the end of the room where cutting machines and packing tables were located, near the truck bays. The air of the room cheerily clacked with productive noise. Stan and Parker wore earplugs, which necessitated that they speak louder than customary conversational volume. They worked fast and focused on their hands, the material, and their conversation.

Because their backs were away from the main entrance, and as people were always moving about, they did not notice when guards wearing black uniforms, helmets, and carrying short-barreled automatic rifles entered the room. Following behind this Special Security Threat Team was a man wearing a tie and a brown sports jacket. Threat Team members, with the man in their midst, walked up unnoticed behind Stan and Parker, the latter of whom was beginning a jocular tale about a legendary, uncatchable poacher named Jack.

As Parker explained, Jack kept a cabin in a forest-surrounded meadow close by a pleasant lake. A certain rookie game warden, who was determined to catch Jack, arrived early in the morning long before daybreak and stealthily climbed the chimney of the cabin onto the roof. The game warden waited in the frigid air and kept himself from shivering, which would give him away. By and by, while it was still dark, the game warden heard muffled noises in the cabin below. Soon he smelled woodsmoke, and after that, the sumptuous fragrance of coffee, and bacon and eggs frying over the fire.

It was then that Stan and Parker at the same instant glanced sideways and caught sight of dark forms behind them. They wheeled around, startled.

"Go ahead. Finish the story," the man in the tie and coat said loudly, over the noise.

Stan recognized the man as being Kiplinger.

"Go ahead. Now!" Kiplinger ordered.

He did not look as cruel as memory and his reputation made him out to be, Stan thought. Just an ordinary man—rather

indistinct in appearance, except that possible pre-cancerous sun splotches marked his forehead.

Parker went on, uneasily. "Well," he said. "The game warden smells the tasty food frying. The sun soon cracks the horizon. The warden sees deer browsing in the meadow between the cabin and the edge of the woods. Surely Jack will shoot one and then the game warden will have catched him in the act—caught. All of a sudden, the front door opens below and footsteps pound on the boards of the front porch. Instead of a gunshot, a loud voice calls, 'All right, Mr. Game Warden. I know you're out there. Come in and have some breakfast now. I got hot coffee brewing on the stove.'"

Parker nervously cast his eyes to Kiplinger.

Kiplinger said threateningly, "Finish it."

Then Parker continued. "Well, the game warden, he climbs down, only too glad to come in out of the cold. He pulls up to Jack's table and helps himself to the eggs, potatoes, and bacon, fried with peppered venison.

"'Jack, you're so smart,' said he. 'I crept up as silent as a mouse. How did you know I was out there, anyway?'

"'Huh?' said Jack, 'I didn't know you was there, Mr. Game Warden. I go out on my porch every morning and say that little speech.'"

Normally, Stan would have laughed, and Parker would have begun another story before his audience had finishing laughing.

A slow smile crept up Kiplinger's face. "Funny. That's very funny."

He stepped up to Stan and grabbed him under the jaw. Parker lurched to intervene and he was knocked to the floor by a guard. Kiplinger's eyes flicked all over Stan's face as if he were a plastic surgeon planning what improvements to make. Stan did not resist. Kiplinger dropped his hand and turned around as if to leave. After a few steps, he stopped, put a hand out before him, and rubbed his thumb against his fingertips. Seeming to have come to a conclusion or a discovery, he turned back to Stan.

"Okay, Mr. Stanley Pierce Timmons. Your game's up. I know who you are now. You might as well admit it. Your political career is finished. I've read every article you wrote, you know.

I should shoot you right here." He reached for a Threat Team member's pistol and pointed it at Stan.

Stan's face blanched and he felt that he would pass out. All of the Assembly's plans and hopes had collapsed into ruin. But he had the presence of mind to say nothing. He lowered his gaze to his slippers.

Kiplinger exhaled once from his nose sharply, derisively. "Funny isn't it? Scared you, didn't I? I say that little speech every morning."

He walked away and wandered around the print shop, eyeing the workers, all the while glancing back to Stan and smiling, and then he and his retinue left.

In the evening, Stan and men of his suite gathered in their common room with the television blaring an educational program that no one watched. They had only an hour to discuss Kiplinger's prank, if prank it was, before they had to be locked in their cells for the night.

Grey said, "Whatever Kiplinger knows or doesn't know, our status is insecure. We have too much invested for us to shut down all operations; and we have too much development to avoid discovery or infiltration, if he suspects we're here. It would be relatively easy for him to kill us entirely. Men, I think our only recourse is to complete the takeover and defend the prison. Taking the prison is the easiest part. Keeping it . . . That will be hard."

"We should send messages now to friends, to back us up when we depose Kiplinger," Stan said. He was only recently becoming comfortable contributing to these discussions.

"Correct," Grey said. "I have begun already, and we'll work throughout the night to relay the prison layout and surrounding landscape to help our forces make tactical plans. I think, Mr. A.U., you should write a speech to broadcast live in case we are beleaguered, or if we have to declare ourselves."

"Meaning?" asked one of the men.

"Meaning, when we take control here, it might give us protection if we declare ourselves to be the true government of the United States—a Declaration of Right and Sovereignty—and rally the people to our cause. So far we have remained secret. The hour is nearing when we must step into the light. Once we

take the prison and reveal ourselves, then there's no retreat; we have to push forward and win this fight, if possible."

"Or begin the fighting," Stan said thoughtfully. "Open, widespread war hasn't started yet."

"I'm not so sure. Events are moving forward even now, as we speak," Grey said. "But yes, for our part . . . or begin the fighting. But if the GiP wishes, and if the people don't respond, the GiP could drop hell onto our heads."

"I'll work on the speech. All night."

"Good idea," Grey said impassively.

"What should I say?"

"I'll give you some technical, legal wording, but for the important part, you know better than anyone. Say that it's time for sacrifice, for helping each other. I'll have some people review it when you're done."

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The soft blanket of night drew over the glowing prison and the surrounding subdued land. The men of Stan's suite and the other forty-five hundred men, and some women, had retired to their cells hours ago and listened to the electric locks engage, sealing them inside. Most of the inmates fell asleep, but many remained awake. With flashlights, several of them worked in a calm that they knew might foreshadow a great storm. The prison, for perhaps a few hours more, was at the edge of a hurricane. When the storm shifted, destructive winds would bear down upon them.

In his cell, Stan wrote his speech by hand on paper, and it flowed from him smoothly until he finished it—the first draft. As he stretched out on his bed and relaxed for sleep, the electricity in the prison went dead. In fact, the entire compound had been cast into darkness. The perimeter lights went dead, the alarm sensors of the fence went dead; everything electric died, if not connected to a battery, such as exit signs and small computers. Stan noticed that the nightlights in the common room blinked out, and he got up to see better through the iron bars keeping him in his cell. Through the windows along the ceiling, instead of the usual orange light, he could see stars and racing shreds of cloud. The ventilation system had shut down.

Through the walls, he could hear muffled, rattling pops of what might be gunfire. And then the suspected gunfire ceased.

"Grey . . . Grey. Wake up," Stan said.

"I'm awake." Stan could hear but not see him, his cell not being in the line of sight.

"Did you hear?" Stan asked.

"I did."

"What's happening?"

"Well, we're locked in. The lights are out, but why haven't the generators kicked on? I'd say we're in trouble. Other than that, I don't know."

The other men roused themselves and held a conference in the darkness. Grey told the communications officer to send messages about their situation, but it was impossible to say exactly what their situation was. "Ask for help, but I don't know what to ask for. It may only be a power outage. We don't want to act prematurely."

Day dawned, and it soon became clear that it was not to be typical. No guards showed up and no food. Water, however, still ran in the sinks, and the men filled up the containers they could find. They ate what food they had stored in their cells, snack food, mostly. They did not hear more small arms fire, but everyone was tense. Stan looked over his speech and tried to make improvements, but he could not concentrate. By noon the fuel cells on the rooftop transmitters quit or the transmitters were discovered and smashed. The communications man said he was no longer receiving incoming messages. He sent last communiqués and received no replies. They had conserved computer batteries to make them last, but now half were dead with no possibility of recharging them.

Stan said, "All we can do is wait to see what happens."

More muffled sounds boomed from outside—large sounds.

Eventually, the neighboring suite got organized and tap-coded messages through the wall, though it was excruciatingly slow. The men in that section, who were a mix of criminals and politicals, knew less about what had happened than Stan's group did. Their difficulty in tapping was probably due to the fact that no one in cells near the walls knew the code, and so they likely were taking dictation, Stan said. He asked the men of his suite to

reassure the other men about their sending for help. He said, "Have courage and be patient."

They replied "thanjs" and reported about two criminals who were diligently sawing at their metal cage with a contraband hacksaw blade. They might be free from their cells by next morning and could try to look out the windows, though they did not use so many words, but rather, "two saw morning maybe look window."

By evening the men were hungry. The air had grown stale. Instead of supper, Stan read his speech out loud, and the men were heartened. "It's good," Grey said. "I wouldn't make any changes. I just hope you can deliver it."

Waiting became their purpose and the momentary weapon of eternal warfare—waiting, and all it entailed. They waited through the night, sleeping only as sleep caught them unawares. The men on the other side of the wall often tapped that there was nothing to report, except progress the criminals had made sawing. Stan kept a chess set in his cell and Grey had another set in his cell, and Stan and a cellmate teamed up to play Grey and one of his cellmates. They called their moves through the iron bars. Stan thought it was his best game ever. He and his partner calculated moves with concentrated meticulousness. Stan's heart raced, and the positions became extremely uncertain and complicated. They arrived at a place where his next move would open up the board, and then what came next would be hard to predict. But it was late and he was worn out.

"I've got to sleep," Stan said. "Our move is the e-knight to f-6, and let's suspend play."

This was agreeable, and quietude settled over the men.

Time passed.

† † †

"Stan!" Grey whispered across the space between their cells. "Are you awake?"

Stan had been asleep, but he woke up in an instant. It was still dark. "Yes," he answered.

"I need to tell you. I would have before, but I wanted to wait until we had privacy."

"What is it?"

"You know we've conducted successful military maneuvers in the western states. From what we've heard in our final communications with the outside, it's possible that the compound north, where your Lydia and her father were kept, has been liberated. I just thought you should know."

Stan lay back on his bed and thought about this for awhile, and then said, belatedly, "Thanks." There was no answer from Grey. It was good news so far as it went, but it was incomplete, and he was not going to allow false hope to disturb his determination and peace of mind. He began praying.

† † †

The next thing Stan knew was hearing excited voices. The criminals next door had successfully cut from their cell and piled up furniture for a look outside their windows. Stan opened his eyes. It was day. The criminals now had a partial view of the outside fence. Nothing was moving anywhere, and most telling of all, the motorized perimeter patrols were nowhere to be seen. By all appearances, the prison had been abandoned by the staff and the guards, with the inmates locked down. For all they knew, the cells were to be their coffins, either from starvation or from airplanes that might now be winging their way to them carrying bombs with the purpose of making the prison site a mammoth crater.

"What do you think happened to the prison personnel who were on our side?" Stan asked, not expecting anyone to know.

"Killed. Locked in. Evacuated. Disarmed." Speculations came from around the suite.

The day passed without news, or movement, or anything of interest happening, except the men became hungrier, and the air grew staler and cold. Stan suggested that someone begin a sawing project of their own, and they all scoured their cells for potential tools—fingernail files, metal spoons, a piece of hardened steel—and they selected one cell with two of the most promising brawny sawyers and tried to toss the utensils to them where they could be reached. A piece of handmade pottery smashed on the floor and sent shards everywhere.

The men got to work, knowing full well it was futile. "But why not?" one said. "In a week or two we *might* get through."

That night the nervous peace shattered when mind-buckling concussions vibrated the walls, the floor, and the air. One of the men who had a military background said, "Those are antiaircraft artillery, I think."

Stan asked, "Whose side are they on?" and no one answered. They took it as a hopeful indicator that they had not already been bombed into oblivion.

Like a mother giving birth who, toward the end of the baby's delivery, sleeps between her hard contractions, Stan dozed between artillery blasts and woke up for each one. A large detonation exploded close by—an incoming missile or shell. The men covered their heads as pressure and noise from the explosion hurt everyone's ears. Fine dust drifted down from invisible cracks in the ceiling and they began to feel a slight movement of fresh air.

"That will be how we can get out," Grey muttered. "When the roof and walls collapse."

After this last bomb, the explosions—both incoming and outgoing—moved away to a further battlefield, which now felt to the prisoners like a distant thunderstorm.

Again, Stan was jarred into conscious existence by some excitement around him. The night had flown by.

"The fence is down!" someone from the wall shouted.

Stan felt dreadfully hungry and wished for food. There was no telling when he might have to call upon sinews, muscles, and lungs to help him run, if by some miracle the prison opened up. He said, "I think we all should pack and prepare to leave, just in case. Let's travel light." There was a laugh. This suggestion gave the men something to think about and do, sorting their few possessions. The bass percussion and small arms shooting noises from the outside resumed and continued sporadically, but the criminals next door tapped that they could now only see dust clouds and smoke.

They all held their breath, listening for tapping, waiting for news. Hours lasted forever. The sky became overcast and it began to rain.

Then, what they feared and hoped for arrived, as they heard through the wall and Stan translated.

Tap, tap, tap, tap -pause- tap, tap, tap, tap. "T"

Tap -pause- tap. "A"

Tap, tap, tap -pause- tap, tap, tap. "N"

Tap-tap-tap -pause- tap. "L"

"Tan-el?" Grey asked. "What the hell is tan-el? Wait. Here it comes again."

Tap -pause- tap, tap, tap!

Stan said the letter.

"Tank! A tank!" they all exclaimed, soberly.

The end was near now, but none knew what it might be or mean. The men stood ready to leave the prison, to run and hide if need be. An observer would not have known it, because they still wore prison blues, and none of them had jackets, but they had prepared their few items of gear—what they expected to take, such as blankets, spoons, and toothbrushes—and they thought about their survival chances in winter, and what reception—friendly or hostile—they would receive from local people. The looks on the prisoners' faces were determined, almost joyful in expectation of the coming adventure. Some of the men were shivering and they wrapped themselves in their blankets. Stan looked around the room. He was proud to be with such men. Though they had no weapons, they were prepared to fight or die, or do whatever Providence asked of them.

It had to be their own tank, they thought; why would the GiP retake the prison? If the GiP could deliver a tank, it could deliver a mega-bomb. And who would they take the prison from? But still, it might be a GiP tank.

They waited. More tanks paraded by within the narrow view of the criminals next door who were peering from their window. Nothing happened for an hour and another hour. Then, suddenly, the power kicked on, and Stan jumped in alarm. The ventilation system began pumping in air, but it was cold. The criminals next door tried their radio and television and said they got nothing but fuzz and static. The sky darkened outside as another night stole down upon them.

† † †

Wild, confused tapping came from next door, but no one could translate the gibberish.

The door opened, and two soldiers entered. They wore black and green combat fatigues and carried intimidating weapons. Their uniforms bore no visible insignias. Their faces were greasy and grimed, but they showed no malice. They strode cautiously into the middle of the suite and turned all around, inspecting the men in the cells, who silently gazed back. One soldier finally spoke, saying, "Is Stan Timmons in here?"

"Yes," Stan's cellmate said. "Over here. Who are you?"

At that, the soldiers' eyes lit up and they trotted from the suite, one of them yelling over his shoulder to the prisoners, "Don't go anywhere!"

The men examined each other's faces to see if anyone knew the meaning of this, and to register the absurdity of the command. Grey shrugged. "I have no idea. Just be ready for whatever may come."

Shouts rang in through the door, which had been left open.

It grew quiet. Footsteps sounded, becoming louder, and they entered the suite. Except for a beret instead of a helmet and an eagle on his collar, the officer who entered wore an identical uniform as the first two soldiers. Stan thought his face was familiar. Maybe he had been one of the lower echelon officers in the photographs he inspected. More soldiers filed into the suite.

"Stan? Which is Stan Timmons?" the colonel asked, turning in place before the cells.

Stan knew the voice before the man gave his name.

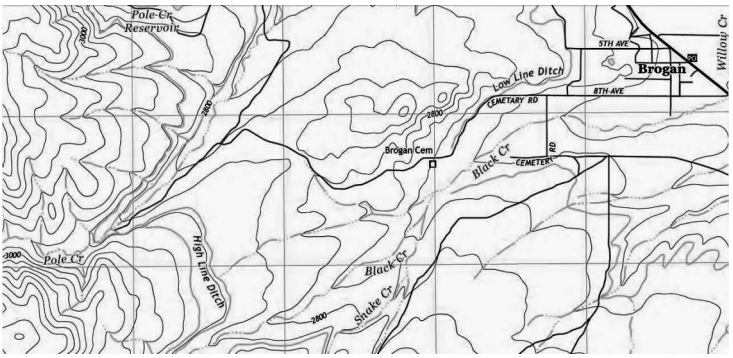
"I am Malcolm. Malcolm Williams. The prison is liberated and in the hands of the true government of the United States of America. Here, men! Somebody! There! Open these cells."

***One of the author's honeybees collecting water in winter.***

*I am walking on the grounds of a large, beautifully landscaped estate. There are lush lawns, flowers, and naturally placed shrubs and trees, and groomed gravel. Green and gray lichen grows on the rocks. It is day, but the light is subdued. A few two-story buildings with long, sloped roofs are set amidst the gardens. This is some kind of community. I look at the sky, which is blackish. There are bright meteors streaking in all directions, and they have a peculiar, curving pattern. Darkness descends, and cold; I go inside a building and find a meeting in progress. A speaker talks about the end of the world. People are worried about the temperature dropping, and the meeting breaks up as they leave for their dwellings to build fires and light lamps.*

*Outside, the stars move. Not like they appear when they wheel about the sky as Earth turns through the night, but they are rushing past like trees for a rider on a rolling train. The earth is moving, not in circling orbits or rotation, but in a line through space to an unknown destination. I look towards the horizon and can see a bright point, which appears to be dead ahead in the path of the planet. It is the only point in the sky not moving. It does not grow larger, and therefore must be a great distance away. I am afraid and also strangely comforted. The dark, star-streaked sky above the thin clouds is also illuminated by strange swirling color, an aurora borealis enveloping the world.*

**–from the dream journal of Stan Timmons**




***Brogan, Oregon. Detail from a USGS map, the Brogan quadrangle.***

## Chapter 30
# The Next Course

The men in Stan's suite were full of joy, and questions, but not so full that they forgot their empty stomachs. Malcolm said in response, "We have men cranking up the kitchens and furnaces."

The soldiers who attended Malcolm dug out their rations and shared them around Stan's suite. Much of the prison's food had been looted out, but they had enough to feed the entire prison population two meals. More supplies were expected, but as Malcolm explained, they would not be enough to keep everyone satisfied for long. This was a problem for which no one had devised a whole solution. Stan asked Malcolm if he knew anything about Lydia and Henry. Malcolm shook his head, but said he was familiar with commanders in the region north and would see what he might learn.

Malcolm escorted Stan to the kitchen area, and still feeling weak from not having eaten for nearly three days, and though it was now past midnight, Stan insisted upon working with the assembled crews to prepare food for and serve the rest of the inmates, most of whom had stayed in their cell areas. Word spread and everyone learned that Stan Timmons, the writer of the inspirational articles, had been at Brogan all along as a prisoner, and the inmates all were proud and pleased, because he carried a servant's heart.

When there was no more for him to do, and outside in the wide world day was breaking, Stan took a shower, changed into comfortable civilian clothes scrounged from somewhere—augmented by a military-issue hooded sweatshirt—and took a long nap on the couch in what had been Kiplinger's office. When he awoke, he went to the spacious windows and drew aside the curtains. The view looked south across low, brown hills that rose higher in the west. All the land appeared peaceful and unconcerned with the trivial affairs of men. The rain had paused, but gray clouds muted the already weak winter daylight.

Stan went to the door and notified a military guard—posted outside to ensure no one disturbed him—that he was awake.

After a short time, a food tray arrived, the entrée consisting of a mouthwatering broiled steak. There was also a baked potato swimming in butter and a tossed salad. Stan laughed in wonder and began to eat.

Malcolm entered and watched for a moment before saying, "How do you like the feast? We found several hundred pounds of steaks hidden back in the freezers. All the inmates will soon be enjoying them."

"I'm a poor conversationalist when there's food in front of me. While I enjoy my meal, tell me how you came to be a colonel in the Army."

"I have news about your new wife and her father."

Stan's heart gave a leap. "Is it . . . is it good or bad news?"

Malcolm laughed. "It's very good news. Shall I tell you?"

Stan desperately wanted to hear, but like a child at dinner who saves his favorite dish for last, he decided to wait. "In a few minutes. Tell me your story. I want to eat and listen."

"Are you sure? You don't know how good this is."

"I'm glad, but there's a lot for me to hear and know. One thing I have learned from my imprisonment is patience. Let's start with you, my friend."

Malcolm ran his fingertips over the dusty desktop, pulled the curtains wider, and gazed out at the view. "You didn't know that I was running Brogan prison, did you?"

Stan stopped chewing a piece of steak and did not quite tuck it into his cheek. "You're kidding."

"This was my office for nearly twelve months, until Kiplinger had me ousted."

"How in heaven?" Stan exclaimed in wonder.

"You eat. I'll talk. It's a long story."

"Go ahead."

"After I dropped you off in the North Cascades, I returned home and right away called my FBI office. Like most people in our office, my supervisor had missed workdays because of the traumatic events, and I asked to take more vacation. Morale in our office was very low. When I finally reported for work, I submitted my resignation. All that day I wrote up a report on

what had transpired, as much as I could tell. That afternoon my supervisor, Ms. Nguyen, called me to her office, and lo-and-behold, a Justice Department official was waiting for me.

"He told me I couldn't quit and asked how much money I wanted as a raise. I told him that I needed a new job, not cash. He got up and paced around the room trying to think of a way to entice me. He seemed to hit an answer and said, 'You need a change, Malcolm, and we need people like you within the Federal Expanse.' That's what he called it. He then made a speech and said I was a hero who saved America from a grave threat. He wound up by saying, 'We're not giving you an award ceremony, but what would you say if I offered you any federal job you wanted at triple your present salary?' I said I'd think about it. That made him happy and he promised he would give me a list of openings, and I could pick any one I liked, as long as it was within a certain grade range. I couldn't be a janitor, for example; it had to be a high appointment requiring the skills that I possessed. If so, he said, my wish was his command.

"He said, 'I'll get you the list by tomorrow and you take another week off with pay to think about it.'

"That night I had the list in my hands. There were about forty jobs. My wife and I crossed off those unacceptable or that required moving away from the Northwest. This process left eight. We narrowed it down more—to three—and at the top of our list was a customs administrator position in Alaska. Alaska appealed to us, not the job, and we thought it would keep us and the children out of any strife. The second job was a Portland office director for the audit section of the IRS. That office oversees investigations and certain kinds of collections, as well. The third job was different—the superintendent position for the Sheridan federal prison near Portland. With my background in accounting and law enforcement, I thought I might be able to handle the job, but foremost was the potential for saving lives. I felt so guilty for my part in killing all those people at the Chinook Assembly, and angry, that I knew I should be in a position to resist the federal government, especially if it decided to murder more people. Like prisoners.

"I knew Sheridan was the right decision, but I chose Alaska instead. Alaska was comfortable and safe for me and my family.

When I told the Justice Department man, he hemmed and hawed and asked me what other preferences I had considered. I told him about the other two. He then apologized and said he had to go back on his word. It was out of his control. Powers on high said that under no circumstances was I to have a position other than within the prison system. 'It was either that or,' he said and hesitated. 'Or what?' I asked. 'Or nothing. Nothing,' he said. He had grown serious at that point, and I took it as a threat, that I literally would have nothing—no salary, no job, and no life. I was frightened, but awed by this, because I was forced to what I should have chosen in the first place.

"I asked why it had to be in prisons. He said I had demonstrated my ability for performing my duty even when it might have 'difficult consequences.'

"'When people might die?' I asked.

"'Yes,' he said.

"'Die how?'

"'You know what I'm saying,' he said. 'In large numbers. When necessary.'

"Here is where I knew I had to deceive. He was saying that I might be ordered to slaughter inmates, and since I already had helped kill several hundred people, and if it hadn't bothered me very much, I should be ready for more 'responsibility.'

"I managed to say, 'Yes, I know exactly what you mean.'

"'How do you feel about that?' he probed, personally interested as much as professionally. 'I mean, does it bother you?' he asked.

"'Listen,'" I answered. "'I've been a soldier. I know about blowing up people.'

"'I suppose you do,' he said, wincing, 'but you needn't be so blunt about it.'

"The long and short of it was that I took the job at Sheridan—and for a reason opposite of why I was hired. I took it upon myself to save prisoners the best I could. It wasn't easy, and I kept quiet and I learned. I spent most of my in-office time making sure we had funds and spending them carefully. Then I heard about your hunger strike at Brogan. The story rippled throughout the underground, which I had just begun to tap into."

"It wasn't a hunger strike," Stan interrupted. "Kiplinger tried to starve me into submission."

"Yes, I remember. Anyway, when I heard about you here in Brogan, I understood that something important was going on. I quietly contacted my Justice Department man and told him I was not happy at Sheridan. He himself had transferred into another agency and said he probably couldn't help. I told him I wanted a better job and was scared of working near the city and wanted to move to the new Brogan facility in eastern Oregon. He said he'd look into it, and it turned out that as they were dissatisfied with the then superintendent, I could have the job. We sold our house on the lake and moved the family to Brogan. I was in charge here, looking after you, and everyone, until they fired me in early December last year."

"Why didn't anyone tell me about you?"

"Grey and I thought it best to keep information confined. Need-to-know, you know."

"Also, no one would know we were acquainted," Stan said.

"That's right. Afterwards, when I left Brogan—we had to flee, really, and hide—I connected with the underground and organized to liberate the prison. That story is not terribly interesting, but it ties in with someone you know, Jacob Stahl. He should be arriving here at the prison soon, with your wife, your new wife. Her name is Lydia, right? This is the good news I promised."

"Lydia? Why didn't you tell me?" Stan had jumped up, talking over Malcolm's words. "Lydia is coming? And Jacob?" Stan's voice cracked. "Sorry . . ." he said, and when he collected himself, "for the first time in weeks, and only because they're relieved for the present, I allowed my fears to surface. I've allowed myself to be vulnerable only because it's safe."

"Yes. They're coming."

"How is she? How was she treated?" Stan felt afraid for her.

"I didn't take the message, but my impression is that she's healthy and wasn't mistreated where she had been kept, with other women held by a county sheriff near the Canada border. Her father didn't fare so well. Apparently, he was beaten when first taken, and then he was tortured by GiP Homeland Security agents who attempted to extract information, but they recently

released him into the custody of the sheriff. My guess is that he's not recovered, otherwise he would be here with your girl."

Stan wondered out loud why Lydia had not been treated the same as Henry. Malcolm did not know.

"But how can they come here?" Stan asked. "Aren't we in danger from attack?"

"Yes and no. Did you hear yet? Kiplinger is in a cell here."

"I didn't know!"

"We apprehended him trying to leave the prison. Most of his cronies had already fled. He stayed as long as possible, trying to keep control. Kiplinger has given us some protective cover. While he's not worth much as a bargaining chip, he has a tongue, and the GiP is listening to him, and he has a lot to tell them . . . from us."

"What's he telling them?"

"I'd rather this be conveyed within a formal staff briefing and when you're rested, but since you ask, I assure you that we are on safe ground. The GiP dares not touch us."

"Why not?"

"Because . . . we have nuclear weapons trained on Washington DC. Did Grey mention our goal to acquire them? We were successful."

"How? How can that be? I didn't believe it was possible."

"You need to ask your friend Jacob, who grew up in Montana and as a boy watched fighter jets roaring overhead, and as a boy became familiar with the unusual installations near his colony's land, befriended Air Force border guards in attack helicopters, and then attended the Air Force Academy and became a crack Navy pilot."

"Are you saying he helped capture nuclear missile silos?"

"Ask him when he comes. He'll tell it better. We're safe from nuclear or MOP—massive bomb—attacks, because the GiP now doesn't dare outrage us, not officially. We have the standing of a nuclear power—with ballistic and cruise types—as any of the other dozen nations in the world, though we are confined within the borders of the former geographic United States. We are, however, ethically limited to conventional warfare—the noise of that is what you heard the past few days. Another weapon we have that we've used is disrupting computer grids. Our greatest

danger, though, is through internal faction and the loss of momentum. This is why we need you to give your speech declaring ourselves. Grey showed me what you have written. It should be perfect. The GiP controls military strength, but is morally weak. It's losing grip. We have a chance to win quickly if we can rally people to our side. Congress has adjourned indefinitely, and the President in Office is floundering. We have a chance, especially if we get formal recognition from governments of several other nations, which we hope will follow after your speech."

Stan suddenly felt weary. He did not wish to carry such a load of responsibility. "When will Lydia arrive, and Jacob?"

Malcolm checked his watch. "They are here already, not in the prison, but in the town of Brogan, staying at a bed & breakfast. Your wife heard you were sleeping, and she is resting from her travel, and I wanted to fill you in on our status privately before you saw her."

"Can she and I have some private time?"

"Certainly. You can use these offices as your apartment. We can make it suitable for you to live here until we make other arrangements within the prison."

"That would be nice. Thank you. But I'd really like to get out from these walls."

"This is the most secure environment available."

"What I mean is, can we just go outside for a walk? Can we walk around Brogan, the two of us?"

"If you like. But not until tomorrow. We can't spare the soldiers at present."

"I'd like to surprise her. Tomorrow. I want my arrival at the B&B to be secret."

"Secret? I . . . I think we can manage," Malcolm said, smiling.

† † †

Malcolm had other matters requiring his attention, and Stan and Grey pitched into the feeding and disposition of the men. They immediately opened a processing office. Many politicals wished to return home to see about the needs of their families, but only a few would be allowed to leave, because of the risk of being captured by GiP forces. Most political prisoners were

encouraged to establish themselves in the local community for the present time, to strengthen its superstructure. The remainder of them were to be recruited into government or military duty. Also, other personnel were needed to be brought to the Brogan facility from other locations to fill departmental and service requirements. The regular criminals, whose sentences would eventually be reviewed, were to be relocated, or kept on-site for labor—for instance, the prison's presses were now to be employed for the growing insurgent government.

Some former employees of the prison began returning and asked for their jobs. Since the prison as such no longer existed except for the criminal minority, most of the workers were not strictly needed as prison personnel. But they would be indispensable in helping run the new institution and organizing the compound to be the seat of government.

Albert was among those who came back, and when he arrived at the processing/resettlement office, Stan greeted him. "Albert, I'm so glad to see you!" he said. "How is your family?"

"We are short on gasoline, but we are well enough."

"I think we have a couple tankers arriving today, or tomorrow."

"I wouldn't have abandoned you, sir," Albert said, "except they forced us to leave. There was a rumor that the prison would be bombed. I was worried about you."

"Would you consider a post as my personal bodyguard?"

"I will be honored, sir, when order gets established here."

"Good, good." Stan stepped over to a busy clerk. "Excuse me, this is Albert Rementeria. I can vouch for him. I'd like him to assist in interviewing and screening the former workers to hinder GiP infiltration. Make sure he gets ration cards for gas."

Stan worked late into the night, and at 1:00 a.m. he collapsed onto the couch in his apartment. An orderly brought him breakfast when he awoke at daybreak. Malcolm, who apparently had not slept at all, came in while Stan was eating.

"We haven't gotten the transmitters working again yet," Malcolm said. "Kiplinger had them smashed. Repair parts and replacements are on the way. You should be prepared to give your speech tomorrow."

"Okay. I'm ready now. Almost ready."

"You have some personal business . . ."

"I know . . ." Stan's thoughts drifted away to Lydia. "It's important for me to retreat from the stress and clear my mind, if only for a few hours. I want to inspire fortitude by my speech."

"I agree. I've assigned a detail to accompany you into the town—a private car and two armored vehicles, but it's not available until afternoon."

Stan said that was fine with him, and he worked in the resettlement office for the several hours. Afterwards, he ate a little bit, showered, and took a brief nap.

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For all of his months in the vicinity, Stan had, of course, never been to the town of Brogan. It was compact and quaint in the center, having preserved and encouraged the farm-town flavor that it had always possessed. But along with the growth there of visitor-friendly shops and new trees, Brogan had also developed a commercial desert outside of town along the main highway. Cells of bland housing had sprung up all around. All of this had come in recent years to service the prison and its employees.

The soldier in the front passenger seat of his vehicle, a courteous officer, asked Stan if he wanted to radio ahead to Lydia to announce his arrival, and Stan said he preferred not to.

The stark landscape outside the window rested and refreshed him after being inside painted concrete walls for so long. He looked for signs of warfare, but saw none, except that the considerable number of civilian vehicles approaching from the other direction on the four-lane undivided highway moved slowly and respectfully stopped in the road or pulled to the side when his little motorcade neared. The streets of Brogan seemed empty for the late afternoon rush hour, and the military presence appeared minimal, except around the house in the heart of the town where Lydia was staying.

Stan eagerly walked up the steps to the front door. He knocked, and the door opened.

"Mr. Timmons! I'm Mrs. Sutherland, the proprietor. We've been expecting you. Don't worry, we haven't told Lydia." Mrs. Sutherland was a plump, florid woman in her early sixties. She

spoke in a hushed volume, but Stan could tell that she had power in her voice when she wished. Her husband, an athletic, outdoorsy man in a plaid shirt, stood against a wall, giving the impression that he would rather be anywhere but inside a bed & breakfast run by a woman. Over his head hung a row of mounted, antler-crowned deer head trophies.

Mrs. Sutherland shook Stan's hand and said, "Mr. Sutherland, go upstairs and bring Lydia and the others. Now, please hurry." She shook Stan's hand again. "I have heard so much about you, and read your articles."

Stan heard suppressed glee upstairs, footsteps, and rustling. He looked up.

Lydia appeared at the top of the staircase. She looked lovely, fresh, and energetic, and if she had endured mistreatment, she did not show it. She descended not elegantly, but holding the hem of her skirt up with one hand, and leaning forward, she slid her other hand down the banister, her feet rapidly clumping the wooden stairs with her walking shoes. When she neared the bottom, she jumped the last step and her hands went out to embrace Stan in a bear hug. Stan held her tightly, and they forgot their troubles for a few seconds. The hostess applauded and smiled broadly with delight, letting out a squeal.

Stan lifted his head and now saw Jacob and Julianne descending the stairs. Stan greeted them with enthusiastic exclamations and hugs, and the hostess applauded again and invited them all to her sitting room for tea and scones, which she always prepared for guests, she said. Stan and Lydia exchanged silent glances, and Stan said, "No thank you. I would like to take my bride for a walk instead, if we may? Since I have to live in the prison, I really want to enjoy a taste of luxurious wind and no walls or bars while I can."

Mrs. Sutherland, always the accommodating hostess, said she would prepare tea to go, if that was all right, and she skipped to the kitchen like a young girl.

Holding Lydia's hand, Stan came near to Jacob again and said, "I want to hear everything, my friend. You have an exciting story, but it will have to wait until tomorrow, if that's fine with you. I've often put business ahead of family, but family comes first today."

Jacob nodded, smiling unconsciously, the same as if he had been among the well-wisher crowd watching a wedded couple leave church after their rites. "I understand," he said. "Exciting, however, hardly captures the essence of my story. More like, soul-shaking, supernally surreal."

"I'll need to hear this. But tomorrow."

"We have a briefing scheduled at 9:00 a.m. Your speech will be at noon. Is this correct?"

Stan sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid so, assuming the prison transmitters are working, and I've been told they will be. We have to do this."

As if embarrassed by the possibility of slighting his friend, Stan shook Jacob's hand and assured him of his immense interest in talking "at length at the first opportunity."

Julianne stepped forward with a largish, prettily wrapped box. She was taller than Lydia, and more slender. "It's a wedding present from Mother," she said. "And the colony taking care of Papa sent a present, too—a beautiful wooden cradle they made."

Mrs. Sutherland returned from the kitchen with a white paper bag containing tea in covered cups and hot scones. The women continued talking, and Stan stepped outside, hoping to hurry them to finish.

Mr. Sutherland went out with him. "Be careful walking in this country," Sutherland said. "Cougars have been known to attack people and drag them away."

"There really are cougars around here?" Stan said. "I'd love to see one."

He conferred with the officer who had remained on the porch about their walking course. Lydia remained inside, so Stan poked in his head and an arm and drew Lydia out.

The officer and two guards followed at a distance far enough away for privacy but close enough to lend assistance. Stan and Lydia strolled down the sidewalk hand-in-hand, looking inside store windows. Tanks and clusters of soldiers stood guard at both ends of the street. The couple passed a hardware store, a craft shop, an outdoor clothing and equipment store, a sandwich shop and coffeehouse, an Irish-style pub, a musical instrument shop with pianos and guitars, a pawn shop newly boarded up, an insurance office, and a funeral home. A few people hurried

along, and the remaining shopkeepers stood at their doors and watched them warily. Along the street, handsome twenty-foot gingko trees were growing in small plots of earth set into the stone pavement. At the end of the block, they found a park with winter-brown grass, playground equipment, and picnic benches. In the middle of the park sat a brightly painted windmill. Lydia and Stan sat side-by-side on a bench, sipped their tea, devoured the scones, and discussed the small things that newlyweds always talk about.

A cold dreary mist dusted down on them.

Lydia knew what had happened to Mindy, and she guessed that Stan might have doubts—that maybe she had traded her body for better treatment while in GiP hands, or that she might have been sexually molested. He might feel awkward in asking her, and so when it seemed right, she said, "You may have wondered what has happened to me in the past month. Why my father was tortured and I was not?"

"I am so glad you're safe," he said. "Tell me what happened."

"Somehow, I was protected," Lydia began. "When we were arrested at the border, they separated us right away. I was very scared. The special GiP men who held me in a back room of the customs building were ugly in their words, and I thought they might violate me if they got me away from there. I panicked and screamed and screamed. I must have been hysterical. The border officials in the customs building crashed into the room and pulled out guns. One of the customs officers was a woman. The GiP men were angry, but the customs people made them leave. They, the GiP, had already loaded my father into a truck—an SUV—and they took him. The border people were kind and called the local sheriff. He came in with several deputies. He listened to my story and said he couldn't help me into Canada, but he would let me stay with the family of one of his deputies. They lived in a lovely place away from a town. They had three young children and I helped the wife around the house. This also was a safe house for battered women, and I made friends with them. It was a nice place, and no one bothered me, except I was stuck. I couldn't go home and I couldn't come back here alone. I called around and found where the closest Hutterite colonies were. One said I could stay with

them, but by then my father had been released by the GiP. The deputies brought him to the house where I was, and the nearest Hutterite colony sent men with food. Then my father had to go to the hospital. I stayed with him until the tanks came through the town and we were told the GiP no longer had control. Next, Jacob and Julianne arrived, and we came here. There's more, like the peaceful hours walking in the hills around the safe house, but that's the main story. When my father is released from the hospital, which should be soon, the colony will come and get him. I don't think he wants to come back here."

Lydia looked closely at Stan, who as yet had not responded. "Your wife is virtuous in body and intentions. And no one has harmed me."

Stan sighed and put his arm around her and kissed her once on the temple. "I'd like to hear more about all this later. Your dad is okay?"

She said *yes* quietly, and they sat together without speaking. The sky had been growing darker with the approaching close of the short winter day.

When they became aware that it was time to leave, Stan stood and lifted Lydia to her feet by her hand and hugged her tenderly. Leaning back to see her face, he asked, "When I left the colony, did you ever think we could be together like this?"

"Can I ask you another question first?"

"Sure. Of course."

"I have to ask this. You miss your wife, don't you? You still miss Mindy."

Stan let go of Lydia, but she still held him. He nodded.

"I know you do," she said. "I think you always will, but the pain will lessen as you and I grow closer. I'm not jealous. I know I'm a substitute. But I will—"

"No. You're not a substitute. You supported me so much."

"It's okay. I know I'm a replacement, a little bit, or I will be for awhile, and I want to tell you that I'm fulfilled and happy to help you become whole. I also know that you love me. I love you and want to be a comfort to you."

Stan nodded in agreement.

"To answer your question," she said. "Did I think we would be together in the future? We were together all along, Stan. In spirit, and this made it possible for us to be here now."

Letting go of sorrowful feelings, he remembered his joy and recovered his voice sufficiently to say, "We're going to have a very different married life, you realize, and who knows, but we might all be killed tomorrow, or even tonight."

She adjusted her head covering. "I know . . . Our people have always lived as if we have no husbands and wives because of our order of allegiances. We belong to God first and then to our brothers and sisters in the community. Then to our immediate family."

"Our community may be an entire nation."

"I don't know, Stan. I'm not sure I'm willing for that."

"Well, as soon as I can, I want to settle down on a colony, learn to drive a tractor, and raise a dozen more children."

"I think I'll be ready for it myself," she said laughing, and tickled Stan in the ribs. "You've lost weight. I'm going to have to start cooking and fatten you up."

"I'll be fattening you up soon."

Lydia opened her mouth wide in a mock gasp at the not-so-sly reference to pregnancy.

Stan laughed and tickled her in return, and then he caught the eye of the officer who had been standing nearby. The officer's look told him they should leave right away. The couple, with guarding shadows following, walked briskly past the shops toward the bed & breakfast. When they were halfway back, they saw Jacob running in their direction in haste and excitement.

Stan and Lydia quickened their pace to meet him, and Stan feared something terrible had happened.

"The most wonderful news!" Jacob called as he drew near. "We just received a radio message. Your children, Stan. Your children are in the country and are on their way now to join you. They should be here by tomorrow night, late. The fighting is not over, and yet they want to be with their father. And your sister Sarah is coming, and your brother-in-law Anselm is alive."

Jacob winced at saying Anselm was Stan's brother-in-law, but if it bothered Lydia, she gave no hint—Stan had not noticed any awkwardness in the delight of learning that he lived.

"Anselm was not at the Mollicoat Estate when it was bombed," Jacob said, "and he escaped to safety somehow. I spoke with him just now. He said that he looks forward to talking with you when he arrives."

† † †

Stanley Timmons, the former high school English teacher, rode along in the rear seat of an armored vehicle back toward the prison, with his bride Lydia sitting beside him. Tonight they most certainly would consummate their marriage, with the expectation that children were a possible outcome of the union, even as an ominous storm brooded over the land. It was not a good season to bear children and begin a family, but it was the best season, Stan thought; not the perfect time, but the best time. His children, Maxwell and Chrysanthe, now two years, five months, and four days older than when he last saw them, were on their way from a distant land to be rejoined with their father and their adoptive mother. Chrysanthe would not know her father, except Aunt Sarah surely would have told her all about him.

The speech he had to give the next day loomed before him—an address to a nation dividing and swelling up to war on a thousand frontiers. It was not a good season to father and deliver a reborn nation, but it was the only season.

*Anselm is alive. Good!* As they sat in the rolling car, Stan wondered how and where Anselm had survived these years. The image of Anselm's lovely fiancée, Coral, who was raped and murdered, crossed Stan's mind. Stan recalled meeting Anselm that day when he and Mindy went on their first date—to climb Beacon Rock. Anselm Sterne—physically powerful, brilliant, and courageous: Maybe he would assume the mantle of leadership that Stan did not wish for himself. If it were possible, Stan preferred to retire from conflict and live a quiet life. But he did not think it would be possible.

Yet a young man, after months of imprisonment and afflictions, bearing wounds from bitter memories, and having nearly been killed on several occasions, Stan felt healthy in body, but weak in strength to accomplish anything. He had survived for others and he had died to himself. He felt happy and sad, hopeful and resigned. He felt resolute, but powerless.

His physical life was either just moving into fullness again, or would soon finally come to an end if arrogance and fear, hatred and stupidity, lust, envy, sloth, vanity, and cowardice, from within and without, overran him and his friends, and those who fought beside him.

And the present threat and the circumstances of his own life reflected the condition of the nation and world that had been home for his few years.

Stan gazed from the window at the wet trees, subdued hills, and fields passing by, and the heavy mass of clouds rolling overhead. He lifted his arm up and put it around Lydia's shoulder, and he noticed that his own shoulder, while stiff, no longer hurt—it was practically healed. Raindrops beaded and slid down the glass, and the last light of the day had nearly faded. The windshield wipers swished and thumped back and forth. Snow began to fall in heavy clumps.

"I wish I could compose a symphony to describe how I feel," Stan said. "I almost believe I can hear the music now. It's bittersweet and all encompassing."

Lydia leaned more closely into him and squeezed his hand.

A bright, green-shaded flame swiftly lifted in a long curve into the air high above their vehicle.

"One of our surface-to-air missiles, sir," the driver said. "A kinetic. This night may not be quiet."

"I hope we're ready," Stan said.

***Swiss K-31.***

**Lago Nahuel Huapi.**
PHOTO BY PRISCILLA HUNT

# Epilogue

*What follows are selected letters written by Mark Ponder, M.D, formerly of Vancouver, Washington, USA. Barbara was his wife. The letters have been edited for length.*

Dear Barbara,

I've been kidnapped and held against my will. I don't know where I am, but I have some guesses. I am well fed and fairly comfortable as to physical needs. My kidnappers explained to me the ruse they played to make it look like I had gone crazy and driven to Canada. I can't imagine how anyone would believe it, but considering the attention to details these nuts give, they might have been able to concoct an effective charade. My kidnappers told me that I could send a letter to you someday, but I don't know when it will be. They said that the letters would be censored and that I should only write personal messages of a general nature. I don't know if this letter will ever reach you and how much of what I write will survive, but I hope you are okay and staying out of trouble. I imagine you were upset at my disappearance, but I know that you will adjust eventually. I left you in sound financial condition.

I'm convinced that few specifics will be permitted to be conveyed to you because they would harm my kidnappers' cause, which depends totally upon deception, but I will put on paper as much as I recall and have patience for, and let them decide how to censor me. If they are fools enough to let anything through, then at least you and the world will know that I'm alive, and the world will have a clue about this conspiracy to subvert the United States and its laws. If this letter never reaches you, or if you receive it years from now, at least a contemporaneous history will exist of the crimes committed against me—unless, of course, they burn this. Maybe I will be

the only person to read it, but that's not likely, is it? If I keep this around, they will find it.

My kidnappers are adamant that I am being "incarcerated" because of my abortion work; they undoubtedly will scour this letter for evidence for my trial, which is to begin in a few weeks, they say. I think now I want to describe what I have gone through from the time of my kidnapping up until the present.

On my way to the clinic—this was December 14—I drove under the railroad and interstate bridges at a spot on one of my alternate routes, and I found both ends blocked by trucks. Men dressed in sort-of uniforms surrounded my BMW, and I put up a brief firefight, but they threw a sheet of kevlar fabric over the top of the BMW and pumped in nitrous oxide. That effectively sedated me. I'm not positive, but I believe that after this my BMW was pulled up into the trailer of one of the trucks. The next thing I remember—I was in a fog—some asshole was trying to tell me that I had been "arrested."

What followed was a journey which had several legs. First, I was carried in the back of the truck tied to a gurney for maybe an hour, and when the truck came to a stop, I was handcuffed, blindfolded, and taken out into what sounded like the inside of a large garage. I was allowed to go to the bathroom, and they spoon-fed me a meal at a table. It was actually not a bad dinner, as I recollect. None of my abductors talked in my presence, except to give orders. Next, they transferred me to a smaller truck. It might have been a van. We drove another hour or so. Hard to tell. I lost all sense of time. The van stopped, and they let me go to the bathroom again. It was outdoors and dark. Then we waited in the van a long while. I tried to talk with the men who were in the van with me, but they said nothing. Maybe they were offended by my insults and dirty mouth! I had been afraid when my BMW was surrounded, but this waiting and silence made me really afraid. I thought that they were going to take me into the woods and shoot me in the back of the head. I don't know how, but I fell asleep, and when I woke up, they were opening doors and screaming at me to get out. We walked a few hundred yards and climbed into an airplane. It was a superb plane too, as I could tell by the feel and sound—a jet. In a jiffy we taxied into position and lifted off. I still had the blindfold

and handcuffs on, and my wrists had become chafed. I asked if I could have the handcuffs removed.

The men who guarded me moved away to discuss my request. When they returned, one said, "The handcuffs aren't necessary, but the blindfold is. If you are found guilty of the charges brought against you, then the blindfold isn't necessary. If you are innocent, we will release you. It would be better for us and you if you did not see our faces. Wouldn't you rather wear the blindfold?"

I laughed at this crap but promised not to peek if they removed my handcuffs. There was more conversation at a distance away in the cabin. Someone examined my wrists, and the handcuffs came off. Immediately I removed the blindfold. Some jerk hit me hard in the face and threw me onto the floor between the seats and put his knee in my back. But it was too late because I had seen the face of someone I knew. Dr. Eberhardt Sterne. Unbelievable. I was amazed and asked him what the hell he thought he was doing. Sterne rebuked the jerk for committing violence against me and compelled him to apologize. None of this mattered, of course. I was convinced more than ever of the hatred and evil of these dangerous people. I felt fortunate to still be alive, however. Sterne refused to answer my question, and with derision in his voice said I was healthy enough and he was not needed anymore, and he left the cabin. That man deserves to be hung by his privates and have the skin flayed off of him. He's a perverted lunatic. I can't believe that I went to his house once for that insipid book discussion. He had started working on inviting me months before, after a failed business endeavor of mine that he had been remotely involved in. Remember the commercial property in Troutdale? He must have been keeping me under watch.

I tried to write some things when I first arrived, but I have been nearly insane. This is the first day I felt like doing anything.

Dear Barbara,

I can only write for short periods because I am usually so agitated—I have been jerked from my life and am confined in a cell, a cage in a large room, a welded-iron cage. This morning I had a thought. It might be possible to smuggle these letters to the authorities so I can be rescued. Yesterday I wrote about how these people who hold me are dangerous. They are, but I had not thought of the right word. They are terrorists, radical terrorists. Who knows but they might use me to extort the government into restricting reproductive choice. "Stop killing 'babies' or we saw off his head!"

I am not feeling well. Dizzy. My digestive system is upset. Crap!

Back to my narrative. On the airplane, my captors reinstalled the handcuffs and blindfold. We flew for I don't know how long. An eternity. I feel as if I am still on the plane though it was almost a week ago. I think it had to do with the terror and strain that I was suffering. I slept off and on. Eventually, we landed, and I was moved to another plane, which was a small prop-driven machine, and again we flew endlessly. The landing came as a surprise because I'm sure it was on water. I had no idea where in the world I might be, but I was positive it was not in the United States. Couldn't be, considering how long we flew, unless they flew in circles. I was then trucked directly here, meaning that there weren't any other transfers. I really do not know how long we traveled overall. I would guess one 24-hour day, but it might have been longer.

Here? I presently inhabit a private cage in a room of cages. Mine measures about 16 feet by 10 feet—spacious, I guess. With 8 feet between them, the cages fill a large room with a shining wooden floor and a ceiling exactly like a gymnasium with windows—sort of frosted privacy windows which fill the room with natural light during the day. I have yet to be outside, but the light seems brilliant for December. The days are long, too. I did not understand at first, but I have concluded that we must be far south—maybe Southern Hemisphere. There are a dozen other men in similar cages. I am more or less in the

middle of the room and talk with the prisoners in the adjacent cages. They have stories comparable to mine and I might write them later.

How am I holding up? Not good at all. One of the reasons I cannot write for long periods is that I don't feel like it. I am depressed out of my mind and I don't want to do anything but lie on my bed or bury myself in a damned stupid book. When I'm in a dark mood, I can't think, and I was in this condition for a week after I arrived. At first, I was afraid and then angry and then in despair. Other times, even now, when I feel decent, I can't be still or quiet, and I want to scream and yell and destroy everything and everyone within grasp. But I have learned to suppress those urges. There is no use destroying assets for no good cause. The cage is well furnished with a steel-framed bed, a wooden desk and chair and a bookcase, but no toilet. We are taken to a private bathroom on one end of the room. Other than that, there is absolutely no privacy. I complained to the guard about my mattress being hard—body parts of mine were tingling and going numb from lying down, and the next day they brought a softer mattress.

The food is remarkable. Breakfasts and lunches are limited in options. Cold cereals, fruit, and coffee or hot chocolate for breakfast. Sandwiches of diverse kinds for lunch. Saturday morning breakfast is different, with sausage, fried potatoes, and eggs. The guards make notes of our menu suggestions and complaints. The guards are Hispanic racially and have a Spanish accent to their English, but they do not have any Indian in them, or not much. We have three dinner entrée options every day, and each one is, well, you won't believe it. Gourmet. I'm not being sarcastic. I mean, there are wine sauces and butter, garlic sauce, and subtle spices and fancy touches like only the best restaurants in Portland serve. Fortunately, the portions are small or I would already be fat. The salads are rich and varied in greenery and vegetables. The cooked meals arrive promptly at 12:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. in an electric truck and are served on covered stainless steel trays. Ceramic plates, bowls, cups, and glass drinking glasses are not allowed, I guess, but the decorated plastic service is fresh and in like-new condition. You would never imagine a prison with food and service like this, and it has the effect of

pacifying the other captives. All of us hate the deprivation of our freedom. We are violated beyond what could be justly compensated for, but the food is . . . It makes the prisoners feel special. Not me—the other prisoners have been sucked into this monkey business. You know me—I suspect that we are being fattened for slaughter. What else could be the reason? These people could be cannibals, like the blind witch in Hansel and Gretel. I need a damned skinny stick.

December 24, 2013

Dear Barbara,

This morning I found out exactly what date it was. All I did was ask the man who brings food, and he told me. Christmas Eve. What does it mean? I'm not the kind of person who can deceive myself for long . . . What a coincidence that this is a supposedly joyful time of year. I feel terrible physically, but not as bad as I have felt. I miss you and the children. Christmas is for children, right? Without them it is meaningless. I can't imagine what you are going to tell them, or how you will make a holiday out of this mess, but you will cope somehow. I cry when I think of this, and I have been crying a lot. I have threatened to kill myself, but the guards and wardens have not taken me seriously. A potential for suicide is not on my résumé, I mean my profile, and they know it.

I wonder what happy tortures they will have in store for us. I suspect they will kill us with kindness, which seems to be the method of punishment. Party and presents. The other prisoners have cooked up a holiday observation with singing and candles. It is shit, anyway, considering I am a pampered animal in a pen. I can't believe the other prisoners are going along with the celebration. They have been here longer than I have.

As I write, the news has circled around the gym. I can't believe it! This is inconceivable! We are going to have our own keyboards and monitors with computer access to the Internet as a Christmas present. No doubt they will block sending messages

or dispensing information and going to girly sites, but at least we can get news and read anything we want. We will be able to send electronic mail in-house, meaning between prisoners, for whatever that's worth. Yelling seems to have worked just fine. Computer installations are to begin this afternoon.

I am thinking of you and the children. I wish I could write for real. Maybe we prisoners will learn how to spirit out secret letters through our computer access, but I doubt that will happen. I wish I could lie down beside you. Strange . . . for a long while (before my abduction) I felt I needed a change, a holiday, a vacation. If I could go outside right now, right now, and walk around, or if I were not so obsessed with the violation done to me, I might actually enjoy my situation. I try to imagine what it's like outside this zoo. My emotions take wide swings and leaps. Wait. . . They are bringing in computer boxes right now. I will have to quit this. I suppose this is a good thing, but I would rather have a lawyer. Better, a gun. If I couldn't escape with it, I would use it at my trial. Some defense, right? Hard to argue with a gun, unless you have a bigger gun. Unfortunately, my enemies have the bigger gun. (Did you ever hear this quote? "You can get a lot farther in life with a kind word and a gun than you can with a kind word alone." Ha! It's by Al Capone.) But to my new Internet access . . .

December 25, 2013

Dear Barbara,

What bothers me most is that you probably believe I abandoned you and the children. It's not your fault but that of my captors, who concocted their elaborate scam. I have been thinking about this a lot. I have to confess that to some extent the Mark Ponder of my previous existence had abandoned you. You knew I was not entirely faithful to you. But I was not entirely unfaithful. Women don't understand that men can love more than one woman at a time. There were others, but I hope you know that you were my best friend, as much as I had friends.

But if there was any pain to you for my having "lovers," I'm sorry. Right now I have no friends at all—most of the men in the other cells are disgusting and dimwitted, or absurdly egotistical. I am only appreciating you as much as you deserve now when you are out of reach. But I'm afraid that you will be moving on to someone else since I am gone. It seems ironic and unfair that as I desire to be more of a husband, you will be finding a new life, not knowing how I feel and how I am changing. I wish there was a way to get you a message. I am going to speak to my lawyer about this. I am supposed to begin interviewing prospective attorneys tomorrow. Apparently, there will be a speedy trial, which makes sense, since the thing is a farce anyway. They could just shoot me and save themselves trouble. Everyone here is glued—plastered—to his computer screen today. That will get old.

Love, Mark

December 26, 2013

Dear Barbara,

My captors don't waste time. This morning Eberhardt Sterne spoke with me in a private conference room to the side of the main hall here. Sterne presented a portfolio with background information on three attorneys, and I selected one of them for their mock trial. What the hell, I thought. I'll play along and see if I can find an advantage. I have to credit them; they are organized. The attorney I selected, unbelievably, is a well-known defense attorney in Portland, Hardy Ravenell. I am sure you remember him. He's one of those rich, progressive lawyers who take up lost causes and high-profile, oddball clients and wins. The other attorneys that Sterne presented were Isadora Parker and J. Michael Morrison. I was tempted to take the woman, but her photographs showed her to be far too attractive, and this would be distracting. You should be proud of me. I have given you these names because these people are part of this

conspiracy. Sterne said that Ravenell will begin working on my case immediately, but it will take him a few days to arrive here, which suggests again that I am not being held in the U.S.

During the conference with Sterne, I lost my temper and yelled. I think he was embarrassed to be engaged in this adolescent spy game. Sterne did not take offense or flare up at my rant. He shook his head and said that maybe in time I would understand what's going on. He said it was not his place to tell me, but because of my present "attitude" he would "venture to say that the case would likely bring a death penalty verdict." I am worried about this now.

When I was kidnapped and being moved, I was afraid, but also pumped up, which afforded me a natural anesthetic. I thought I was going to die. But when I learned that I was not going to be executed immediately, and in light of the relatively splendid conditions of this imprisonment compared to what I imagined when I was snatched, I began to think that things were not so bad, and I would live and find a way to escape from here. But Sterne said that this was definitely not a game. As he said, "The people who captured you are serious, and they risk their lives to arrest and bring to justice people like you." In a cold light, the death penalty threat sobered me.

I have begun preparing material for my attorney, and the computer is invaluable for this. I cannot imagine how this is going to be a real trial, but if it is only a fake, it's a realistic fake. At least it keeps me busy.

I have not been sleeping well. Sterne refuses to give me alcoholic beverage or medicine to make imprisonment more bearable, but he will consider my request to give you a message. I think about you a lot, but when I contemplate what our life was, I only believe that you are trying to forget me, and I wouldn't blame you. My former life is gone forever, it seems.

Love, Mark

December 29, 2013

Dear Barbara,

It's Saturday evening. Ravenell arrived early today, and we spent every minute until an hour ago in conference about my trial, which is to begin on Monday at 10:00 a.m. I don't know how he can be ready. He said he began on my case the instant he heard that I had selected him, and that he would work on it all day tomorrow. He is an earnest man who seems determined to do his job well. Seems. As I write this, I realize how vulnerable I am, because I am beginning to take this stupidity seriously. I calmly asked him how he, who has a sterling reputation in the legal community, could stoop to participating in this judicial farce. He exploded and asked if I would rather have a bullet in the brain. He said it would be a lot simpler for my captors to shoot me and dump my body out at sea for the sharks to eat. When he calmed down, he insisted that I should trust him and that a challenge to the authority of this tribunal would be part of my defense. When I asked him if our challenge would extend to reporting these activities to the government of the United States or to the United Nations, he did not answer directly. He did say, "I'll think about that."

Another thing I said made him uncomfortable. I bluntly asked if there was really a chance of a not-guilty verdict, and if I was not guilty would they really let me go. He stared at me for a moment, helplessly. This is what he said: "You don't know the people who hold you. First, they wouldn't have arrested you unless they believed in the certainty of your guilt. Second, if you were found innocent, they would free you."

I said that I did not believe him. I asked if they had let anybody go yet. He said *no*, that to his knowledge no one tried by this tribunal had been found not guilty. I suggested to him that they could not afford to find anyone not guilty. He strongly disagreed and said something like "If there had been an error and they had arrested the wrong man, then arrangements would be made to release him unharmed and provided with financial remuneration, and for the importance of their purpose it is worth the risk of revealing themselves, because it would destroy their

purpose to wrong an innocent man. So far, they haven't made mistakes, and there have been men and women who have literally sacrificed their lives to make sure that this hasn't happened. In any case, events are likely to transpire that will make the Tribunal's secrecy irrelevant." He did not tell any stories of people who sacrificed their lives, but he said further, "Here's the assumption of the Tribunal: A person who is truly not guilty of the crimes of which he had been accused would understand the importance of not exposing the Tribunal, therefore, in their theory, they would always release the not-guilty defendant and not feel in danger."

I told him this gobbledygook was completely meaningless in practice. The outcome is predetermined. He said that if it was pre-determined, I had made the determination by my actions. I admit, I did some yelling, demanding him to answer a question, which was, "How can a co-conspirator like you give me a fair defense?" Unruffled, he said in reply that this was my choice to believe or not believe him, to trust or not trust him.

We sat in silence for a few moments with the strain hanging between us. I was disgusted with him and his hypocrisy, but I had no other options, except to defend myself, or to denounce the Tribunal to their face. He got up to leave and I said, "Wait." He said, "Why?" I asked him, "Aren't we going to work on my case?" He asked, "Do you want me to represent you or not?" I told him that I needed his help. He said, "Answer this question then. Are you guilty of murder and crimes against humanity?" Immediately I said, "No." He said nothing for a while and did not move, and then I said, "I'll think about it," intentionally echoing his words. He sat down in the chair again and we continued discussing my defense. I need to learn more about what is meant by "crimes against humanity."

When I told Ravenell how emotionally exhausting this preparation is, he said to me not ironically, but sincerely, "You have to admit this is more interesting than vegetating in your cell." I did not say anything.

I cannot write more tonight. Except that in the past few days I searched for news about me on the Internet and saw I am a suspect for murdering Talus Schenk. I did not kill him! I lost my knife at the symphony one night and likely a thug picked it

up. It was a valuable knife. (Did Schenk really commit suicide? I did not think he had the internal fortitude for that.) I wish I could clear up this mess about Schenk. I plan to see what Ravenell can do.

I wish you were beside me. No, I mean that I was beside you, not here—anywhere but here. I do not even know where I am.

Love, Mark

December 30, 2013

Dear Barbara,

I gave most of the day to researching the law on "crimes against humanity." The concept originated 100 years ago with the slaughter of Armenians by the Turks, and it was advanced further during the Nuremberg trials. Later it was applied in legal proceedings regarding organized atrocities in Romania, Yugoslavia, and in Rwanda and the Middle East. The expression began to be thrown around in the past twenty years to describe any type of human ill, from global corporations to poverty and pollution to the production of tobacco. I can see where my captors are headed. They are fastening onto the fashionable trend. The clearest definition of "crimes against humanity" came in 1998 when certain nations under the U.N. adopted a law called the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. This is a direct quote that I have pasted here.

> For the purpose of this Statute, "crime against humanity" means any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack:
> (a) Murder;
> (b) Extermination;
> (c) Enslavement;
> (d) Deportation or forcible transfer of population;

> (e) Imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law;
> (f) Torture;
> (g) Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity;
> (h) Persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender as defined in paragraph 3, or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law, in connection with any act referred to in this paragraph or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court;
> (i) Enforced disappearance of persons;
> (j) The crime of apartheid;
> (k) Other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health.

It appears to me that my captors themselves would be guilty of (i) above, which is:

> Enforced disappearance of persons means the arrest, detention or abduction of persons by, or with the authorization, support or acquiescence of, a State or a political organization, followed by a refusal to acknowledge that deprivation of freedom or to give information on the fate or whereabouts of those persons, with the intention of removing them from the protection of the law for a prolonged period of time.

Also, notice forced pregnancy and enslavement, which is precisely their agenda. Forcing women to remain pregnant and be enslaved to childrearing.

We will press a challenge to the authority of this so-called Tribunal and an exposition of its own crimes against me and others it has captured. I don't think it will work, of course, because these people have demonstrated contempt for the law

while pretending to uphold it. If they have a shred of honor, then I can shame them, and this might be a deterrent from kidnapping more people. It seems obvious that their perceived allegiance to law is a psychological attempt at self-justification for their big-league power games. It is a high stakes way of making their lives meaningful.

I am not so stupid as to think they do not have any arguments. One aspect of their case will be international precedent, especially out of the Nuremberg Tribunal, that crimes against humanity can be tried whether or not they were in violation of the domestic laws of the nation in which they were perpetrated. It sounds too convenient. I believe we can mount a challenge to this assumption. In my practice, I was in complete conformity to the law of the United States. This group of self-appointed judges is in conformity to no law. The only authority they have is the authority of power. They have me within their control and they make the rules, which shows that the rules are arbitrary. (Remember the classic book and film *Cider House Rules*?) What right do they have to deprive me of freedom and life?

None whatsoever!

In my practice, I offered medical service which was helpful, wanted, and needed. Women voluntarily came (some felt compelled by their circumstances or by another person) and procured my services. The law allowed it, and the alternative to abortion being legal, as we will say a million times, was the back alley and the coat hanger. This awful horror the anti-choicers risk to save slugs? Yes, the fetus has potential life, but the early fetus is no more sophisticated developmentally than a slug.

I am tired. This is wearing on me. I need to breathe fresh air and walk around. My thigh is sore, probably from inactivity. The guards opened the windows today, and the air was fragrant and hot. Odd weather for the end of December. Tomorrow the trial is to begin. There won't be a jury, but a panel of "international experts and justices." I wonder what worm-infested holes they dragged them out of?

Tonight I will be conferring with the other prisoners. They, like me, are medical doctors. Most are from the United States. I will give you a list of their names later. There has been talk about an escape plan, but it's a joke. Supposedly, women

prisoners are kept in another building nearby, and the men want to escape to *there*. Can you imagine such a meeting of OB-GYNs? It would *not* be a medical conference for CME credits! I am laughing as I write. Picture the examinations! No, don't.

–Mark

December 31, 2013

Dear Barbara,

The trial lasted one day. That's all. I couldn't believe it. It's over except for sentencing, which is tomorrow, a holiday. New Year's Day. They must be conducting these sham trials on their vacations. I was not allowed to know the names of the five-member Tribunal, but I know that two of them did not speak English because they wore earphones. One was black and the other of Middle Eastern ethnicity, maybe.

The wording of the oath given to the witnesses was bizarre. "Do you swear by almighty god, the omnipotent, that you will speak the pure truth and will withhold or add nothing?" The most surprising happening was the appearance of Erika, my first wife, and Robyn Asiguanan, a former office manager of mine, who quit shortly before I was arrested. She brought a nasty photograph which she claimed she had taken of a fetus I had terminated. There were others too, whom you would not know, who testified as to my gynecological work. Some supposedly had been patients, but I do not recall them. So many women herded through my clinic. How strange it was to have my past thrown into my face in this place removed from anything I have known before. It was a parade of ghosts, regurgitated from the grave and refleshed. The strangest apparition in a most weird day was a man named Telford, who came last. He was the father of a girl whose pregnancy I aborted—she died from infection and hemorrhage. Telford cried and could hardly get out intelligible words. He was unbalanced and did not help the

prosecution, or wouldn't have with a real jury. The poor man needs a psychiatrist.

It is unbelievable how they got so many people here.

Except for Telford, Ravenell asked each witness approximately the same questions. He was admirable in his tactfulness, but the questions were biting. He asked, "Did you take this job knowing that abortion was perfectly legal?" or "Did you willingly and freely seek the services of Dr. Ponder?"

There was not much else Ravenell could do. He brought up one "expert witness" on war crimes who said that there was no precedent for charges like this, and he went further by saying that there was not a hint in current international law that abortion was a crime, let alone a crime against humanity. There is no consensus anywhere that a fetus has rights. The prosecutor's response was to lamely question our witness about antiquated laws still in effect around the world. As I knew ahead of time from what Ravenell said, they had no personal witnesses on my behalf, except myself, and you can guess what I said.

The closing arguments were brief—twenty minutes per side—and then the Tribunal members asked questions. The prosecutor said one or two remarks about how it had been clearly established that I conducted about fifty procedures a week, more or less, over a twenty year period, not counting early chemical abortion, on fetuses ranging from six to sixteen weeks. (He said it was not necessary to show evidence of older "children" I had aborted.) He used the remainder of his time showing ghastly photographs of aborted fetuses. I couldn't watch it and shaded my eyes for awhile. I know the Tribunal members watched me, but I did not know what to do. If I looked at the pictures, they would think I was hardhearted and defiant. If I did not look, they would think it was an admission of guilt. If I let my eyes wander, they would think me callous or crazy. To solve the problem, I alternately looked up and down and around the room. I decided not to doodle. (I thought you might like the joke.)

At the beginning of the prosecutor's presentation, Ravenell challenged the use of the photographs, saying that their authenticity had not been established, nor had they been formally entered into evidence. The prosecutor looked taken aback for a moment and then dug into his papers and pulled out copies of an

affidavit, which he handed up to the Tribunal and to Ravenell. No one but me more than glanced at the affidavit. I had the impression that the Tribunal had seen this paper before in other cases, and being an over-familiar document, it had been overlooked. The affidavit had been signed by a few leading "fetologists" who said that the pictures were real and were properly labeled as to the age of the fetuses.

Ravenell performed his duty, challenging the authority of the Tribunal. He made much of its clandestine character and the fact that no properly constituted government had authorized the Tribunal. The prosecutor in his turn emphasized that the nature of the matter required secrecy and suggested that governments did back the Tribunal. The prosecutor compared the situation to war on terrorism, saying that abortion was a kind of war—of individuals against members of their own families, and was state sanctioned and protected, which necessitated an extraordinary response. He said further that as a prosecutor he represented not any manmade authority but rather the "victims," meaning fetuses, who had no status as citizens in any nation, and all of the "earth and heavens" cried out for "justice" against the killers, meaning me. It was an impassioned, disgusting speech, and despite the mechanical nature of the proceedings, the Tribunal listened. I looked to Ravenell and *he* was doodling on a sheet of paper. He saw me watching him and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "What did you expect?"

The prosecutor was a powerfully built young man, in his mid-twenties, just out of law school no doubt. When I first saw his blonde hair, thin beard, and baby face, I laughed, thinking him a milquetoast, but he was fierce and aggressive, bordering on sarcastic, alternately with deferential calm. I mean, he would blow up emotionally as if he were going to totally lose control, and the members of the Tribunal appeared uneasy and shifted in their chairs like they were preparing to reprimand him, and then all of a sudden he would become perfectly calm. Good act. I asked Ravenell his name, but Ravenell said he would tell me later.

I wrote here earlier that sentencing will be tomorrow, but I should have said that the verdict will be tomorrow, too. Ravenell said that I have a snowball's chance of acquittal, but at

least the Tribunal did not issue a ruling at the conclusion of today's session, which means there are issues to deliberate. What those are, he would not guess, but it was a positive sign, maybe. (I am fooling myself again.) However, he said that I should prepare for the worst.

The trial was conducted within walking distance of the building which contains my cage. I was escorted there in the early morning and they did not handcuff or blindfold me, so I got a look around. It is midwinter on the calendar, but it is not winter here! That means I *am* south of the equator. The air was like a clean summer morning, a day like we seldom had in Portland/Vancouver with the pollution locked in by temperature inversion. Here was the smell of ocean, and a chill, refreshing bite in the air. I feel as if I have gone back 100 years, like a mirror image Rip van Winkle for whom time marched backward, rather than forward, while he slumbered. I will write more about the buildings and grounds if I can. With the speed of action here, if there is an execution, it will be sooner rather than later.

My thigh hurts again, and sometimes it is numb and cold. It's worse at night when I have nothing to occupy my mind. I am afraid it might be serious.

There is a New Year's celebration tonight in the Gin Gym—that's what we call this large room. There is to be a tepid band playing music, and champagne and a buffet, and we are to be let out of our cages. Good! But no dancing! (No women except for a couple of the guards.) The music is wallpaper only. And there will be extra guards. Who knows, this might be my last night on earth. I wonder if they will hang me. I will drink all the champagne I can hold, if it's any good.

Love, Mark

January 2, 2014

Dear Barbara,

I don't feel like writing. Partly because I am hung over. Yesterday the Tribunal gave me a death sentence with one hand and withdrew it with the other hand. Their reasoning, as the spokesperson explained, was because of the provisional, unsettled, or *ad hoc*, nature of the Tribunal, though he hinted that members of the Tribunal had been unofficially appointed by un-named governments. While I "deserved death" for my crimes, as he said, the Tribunal did not consider that it could, in complete self-confidence, carry out the "ultimate sentence," and that it wished to allow for a "desired but unforeseen opportunity for a full and open international review of our system and adjudications." He also said some crap about mercy leading me to repentance.

All along I had expected a death sentence, and part of me resigned myself to this fate. In a sense, when I heard the sentence, I died. All along they had given no suggestion that the sentence might be suspended. I thought that I would be shot yesterday evening, and I had prepared. A certain part of me rebelled against my abduction and this phony trial, but I can see that rebellion is for no purpose. What is the point of being defiant any longer? I can imagine continuing the struggle, but I am tired. Now it seems that I will live, though I am dead. I'm not sure what this will mean.

You should receive a letter from me soon. Not from me, but about me and with my signature. Sterne gave me a letter *he* had composed—so I could not convey information through a hidden code. The letter states that for reasons unexplainable, I had to leave home. I signed it. The letter asks you to forgive me for my offenses against you and for my lack of love. Well, you will see for yourself. I tweaked it here and there. While not exactly my words, it expresses the essential truth, and especially my love for our children. The letter contains a denial about the slaying of Talus Schenk, for what it is worth, and gives a true account of how I lost my knife, the one that supposedly killed him.

Sterne told me that it was his oldest son who acted the part of prosecutor in my trial. I thought there was a resemblance. Impressive boy, unlike my worthless older children.

I am not sure of the future. It's depressing but thrilling and frightening. I am a child, having no control and seeing the world created every day. I must learn to take pleasure in small things or else I will wither. Right now my life appears hateful. This cage not only protects society from "depraved monsters" like me, it guards me from myself, so my captors say.

Love, Mark

February 2, 2014

Dear Barbara,

There has not been much to write until recently. I now know where I am held and more about who is behind this international underground "government." As I wrote earlier, my cage is housed within an old gymnasium, but what I haven't said is that it is on the north end of a luxury resort in the southern section of Chile. I can't tell you the exact latitude, but my Internet research suggests that I am south of Puerto Montt on a large island or peninsula. The gym is well away from the cluster of buildings at the center of what was once a huge, rich plantation. Tourists never have reason to go near this part of the resort, except a few who seek a stray golf ball. In those cases, one of the several groundskeepers who watch during all waking hours politely steers them back onto the course. There are people coming and going from around the world, and this gives cover to the conspiratorial activity.

To the west of my prison is the Pacific Ocean, which I often can see a few miles away when I am outside, and to the east, the land rises gradually until mounting into the Andes, which form the geologic backbone of this nation. The mountains are not high in this part of the range, but they are far enough south to be covered in ice year-round in the upper elevations. North, the

fertile land of this country stretches for a thousand miles until the Atacama Desert. Not far south begins a rugged terrain where ice rivers flow from the mountains nearly to the sea. The weather is similar to the Northwest, though the seasons are opposite on the calendar. The air here is cleaner than in Portland—more like the Oregon coast.

In the few weeks since the trial I worked up to "trustee," but it's not called that. It means I was allowed (notice that I said *was*) to leave my cell to perform landscaping duties, such as planting flowers and pulling weeds. Also, I had the privilege of picking up litter around the recreational areas of the resort, like the tennis courts and swimming pool. But I was not permitted to speak to anyone other than my escorts—armed guards in the guise of grounds workers. At some point, as I thought of escape, I accosted a man who appeared to be an American, lounging at the edge of the swimming pool and reading a novel. I told him that I was a prisoner and presented him with a note to take to Chilean authorities. The man looked shocked for a moment and drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. Then he took the note and said, "Indeed! Your name is Mark Ponder, I believe. I'm familiar with your case." He had been wearing only a swimsuit, and he picked up a robe, put it on, covering his hairy chest, and departed.

That afternoon before supper I was brought to an interrogation room for a "review" of my conduct. I was reprimanded for conversing with the resort guest and was told that my note was "intercepted." As a result of my improper communication, I lost my outside work privileges. I expressed bitterness at the guest's betrayal of me. The interrogator asked me if I knew who the man was. I asked him "How the hell should I know?" The interrogator said, "Then let's just leave it there."

Late that night Eberhardt Sterne came to my cage and asked if he might talk with me in a conference room that adjoins the gym. I agreed. There was only the two of us. He said he was leaving for the States and he had come to say goodbye. He said that he likely would be back here in a year, around Christmas, and that I should write him about my concerns or needs, and the prison officials would see that he received my correspondence and would convey any answer from him. He also solved a riddle.

He told me that the man at the swimming pool was an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. "Well," Sterne said smiling, "I suppose being half-naked made it difficult to place him." Sterne identified him by name and I realized myself who he was. I hesitate to write his name because this is a person you would not expect to join these proceedings. It is as if he had lied his whole life to gain this position of power, and then when he reached it, he changed his opinion, except he has not changed publicly. Likely he is waiting for the right moment. This long-term deception might seem aberrant, except that our side has been doing it for years . . .

After Sterne left, I entered my cell and sat on the bed. I slowly looked around at the furnishings and gazed through the bars to the large room filled with gorilla pens like mine. Everyone seemed busy—reading, writing, talking between cages, staring at their computer panels. My neighbor asked me what was going on. I raised my hand to indicate that I did not wish to talk. For two hours without getting up, I was filled with bewildering emotion which gave way to thinking about my recent history. During this time I underwent a monumental transformation in my thoughts. I rose and stretched and began exploring my cell, handling the artifacts it contained, with a new perspective. I am not ready to commit to paper what this is because I mistrust myself, but I did sit down and begin this letter.

The pain in my leg? I knew that I had a large palpable mass in my thigh, but I've ignored it for a long while. My fertile medical mind is certain that it's cancer, likely liposarcoma, and in a few days, I have an appointment with physicians who are coming to the prison to look at me.

Except for the limits to our movements and the continuous electronic monitoring, the prisoners here live well. This is my home now. The panic of my arrest, the fear during transport, the anger and defensiveness of the trial and its immediate aftermath, all have melted into acceptance that I am safe and my former life is gone forever.

Love, Mark

May 11, 2014

Dear Barbara,

Though it is fall, today is sweet and mild with fresh breezes. Most of my days now are calm and regular. I wake early, eat breakfast, and then I am let out to tend the grounds. Recently, I have been raking leaves. At noon, I eat a large meal and return outdoors. In the evenings, I seldom eat the rich food but spend my time reading, researching medical topics on the Internet, or watching movies. I've been studying Spanish. The men around me engage in continuous banter, and I have yet to find anyone that I would call a friend. A few men here, like myself, seem to have withdrawn from meaningless interactions with others, and I feel a kinship with them, but we seldom talk.

The other day I found a documentary made in a monastery in the mountains of France, and before that, I watched a film about a Buddhist monastery. I now often play them on my computer for company in my cell. Neither has any voiceover—just film of the monks praying, singing—going about their lives. These have shown me it is possible to live a joyful life of solitude and austerity. I have not adopted a particular set of beliefs, but I am learning the habit of inner silence. I have been sleeping well.

One of my fellow prisoners seems to have taken a vow of silence. He works on the grounds with me. I have nicknamed him "Big Buddha," because of his belly. He writes copiously on his computer every night but will go a week without speaking to anyone unless someone speaks to him. Every so often—every few days or so—he abruptly stops what he is doing, smiles comically, his eyes light up, and he does a dance and laughs. It's uproariously funny and makes me laugh until it hurts, but he never shares the joke with anyone, and I am afraid to ask him.

The physicians found a potentially virulent cancer in my thigh, one which could have spread to my lungs or liver and killed me quickly. I underwent emergency surgery in a hospital in Santiago and have begun chemo treatments, which they do here on the resort. They say my chances of survival are good. I am able to walk now, but I'm slow.

I love you. –Mark

September 8, 2017

Dear Barbara,

It has been nearly three and a half years since I wrote you last. Only one letter was actually sent, as you realize, but I wrote other letters. You couldn't know, because I was not allowed to send them because of security, and now I *will* not send them. The reason is because that Mark Ponder—the one who composed those letters—does not exist. Years in prison have changed me beyond recognition even to myself. Memories of what I used to be like are like those of someone else, like a novel I have read over and over. I have been in prison, but I will not tell you where. I know where and why. I can tell you the why, though you may not grasp it. I hope you will try to understand.

I wanted to write you sooner but kept putting it off. Now that the U.S. Government knows about an underground government within its borders, I cannot postpone this communication any longer. I'll leave it up to you to choose if you will give it to the press—if you wish to be thrust under the glare of public scrutiny and hostile disclamation, and maybe even face danger. That is your decision. You may wish to give the letter over to the government; this I beg you not to do unless it goes to the press first. I do not want the government to use my letter as an investigative tool without having the positive elements of informing the public about my altered perspective.

I realize that the work I did was criminal, that, in fact, I was murdering human beings. I did not arrive at this conclusion because of logical reasoning, or elegant, graceful presentation of the facts of life (which I knew, of course), nor because of a spiritual experience or conversion, nor because the government had made abortion "unnecessary" economically, nor because my enemies were polite and kind, but for this and this alone: The truth of it was demonstrated to me—a living illustration. Let me explain by giving you the background. This is so important, and I hope that my letter can be published sometime, but I think it will be ignored, like many words which make sense in this world. Words are not persuasive, but I will try to explain.

A strong hand that I never dreamed existed stopped me cold, snatched me up in the prime of my strength, removed me from

all I thought important—property, career, causes and pleasures, and deposited me into a cage in another country far away.

While I flourished in the U.S., with my conscience dulled by feticide and my practice condoned and protected by society, it was easy to marginalize opposition to abortion and isolate its most outspoken opponents. The law of the land, while it allowed the inconsistency of free speech—permitting people to call abortion "murder," for example—was ruthless in punishing any use of force that attempted to stop the killing. It did not matter if the force was lethal, or entailed the destruction of property only, or if it merely involved protestors nonviolently trespassing and blocking access, the government retribution was rapid and certain. From here it was nearly effortless to invalidate other, weaker opposition to abortion. Whenever a question about the humanity of a fetus, or the subject of the unnatural danger of abortion to women—when these issues arose in a public forum—all that we "abortion rights" proponents had to do was deny it, or change the subject, or get angry, or slam the opposition; and the public was satisfied and/or confused and took no action. It was enough to brand opponents of abortion as fanatical and extremist—religious nuts who wanted to impose their stunted, antediluvian minority values on the rest of us, etc. Graphic images of aborted fetuses affected people emotionally, but they were not enough because there was no appropriate corresponding action. That and the propaganda of pro-abortion-choice leaders was effective at pacifying the population, and also in quieting my conscience. It was easy to believe our deceptions; society leaned its whole weight in that direction. Furthermore, I rationalized that I helped women; but really I hurt—violated them—and I am now ashamed of the horror and grief which I gave them with my own hands… So many . . .

I remember sneering and shaking my head on multiple occasions when I saw how easy it had been to intimidate the garden-variety anti-choicers at home. The leaders of the mainstream "pro-life" organizations also had developed a comfortable lifestyle built on the deaths of the fetuses. They were not likely to rock the boat enough to make a difference because they would lose financial support and friends in political offices. These fools ignorantly believed that if only they could

persuade enough voters, they would win the day. They wanted life easy. They were unwilling and morally unable to pay the necessary price of total commitment and sacrifice.

They were locked into a symbiotic relationship—no—a parasitic relationship with feticide; and a parasite that wishes to survive knows, genetically, not to kill its host. Their whole strategy for change by prudent increments, and by compromise and accommodation—even if they did not know it consciously—was doomed to failure.

They were anxious to win debates and score points in the media, to finely craft their arguments and sway popular opinion, or even to patiently, carefully—oh, so nicely—try to win converts, whom they would use in their counterpropaganda.

I knew, as do most of the insiders of the abortion rights movement, that none of this mattered. We had to put on a display of engaging rationally and legally. Many of our own people depended upon this façade for their own integrity, and some of us actually believed what they said, but I knew, and many of us knew, that our final authority for what we did was *power*. We would use all the power we had, and only a movement more powerful would defeat us.

Next to sheer power, our penultimate weapon was instilling *fear* that women would kill themselves at the hands of back-alley butchers if fetuses gained legal protection again. Essentially, we were holding hostage thousands of women who *might* resort to illegal abortion or coathangers. Our threat was, "If you don't allow us to kill, we have nurtured a social climate of dependency upon abortion where women will die." Beyond this was a promise of widespread revolt and civil disobedience if the country reverted to pre-*Roe v. Wade* days. That became a motivator for the U.S. Supreme Court, which weighed the imagined violent consequences of reversing the social movement against a true understanding of law and science. The court did not want to be responsible for provoking violent conflict, and that meant "abortion rights" were preserved. We in the pro-death-choice movement had successfully created a myth of the "bad old days." We were effective at propaganda, in particular, the lies of "choice" and "women's issues." We drew these weapons whenever they could cause damage, and we diverted

attention to other matters when our arguments were exposed as fraudulent.

When civil strife increased in the past few years, I found that I had particular contempt for a highly publicized sideshow in the efforts to limit abortion. It is undergirded by a belief that abortion is a permanent feature of our culture, and one must be content and build relationships with abortion providers in order to find common ground. I myself did not engage in this approach, though, before my arrest, a colleague of mine in Portland was involved in such a dialogue. This colleague and I discussed the matter at length, and I advised him on how to use these people. While in prison I learned of its outcome by reports published in the newspapers when the group issued joint statements after a few years of dialogue.

I remember what my colleague said about the "pro-life" church leaders with whom he met on a monthly basis at a bakery/coffee shop in Portland with the objective of "reducing violence in the community." He laughed about how easy it was to deceive them, because he had no intention of stopping the violence he committed every day, and he made discussion of this off limits. He knew they believed they were sharing the "gospel" with him, he said, but he admitted to me that he was simply manipulating them into compromise and into division against their more militant brethren. Jesus to him was "a myth." The "gospel" to these spiritual eunuchs was moving their lips in a precise magical incantation, rather than demonstrating the life of Christ.

The pastors were proud that they had been selected for such significant discourse and were being used to "save lives." They hoped that with a relationship of "trust" my colleague would refer patients to them who had reservations about abortion. They maintained a fantasy that my colleague would give them space in his facility where they could counsel women, using material he would approve. From my perspective, then and now, their approach of seeking common ground—what was essentially collaboration—compromised their belief that abortion destroyed human beings because it enabled my colleague to continue his killing work. Before these meetings, he was ready to quit. His condition was disturbing. Where abortion was concerned, he was mentally ill, in denial verging on the psychotic. He was

losing connection and was emotionally unstable. You could hear it in the way he spoke, and he functioned and moved like a possessed machine.

These "pro-life" leaders were like rats in a maze that rush on a short path toward their goal but can never reach it because the passage dead-ends. They find that they are close to their goal physically, but there is an impenetrable wall before them. In order to reach the center, they must go back to the beginning of the maze, and this they were unwilling to do because they would have had to admit they were wrong. I suppose, initially, it was good to dialogue, but they should have seen how emasculated they were becoming. Desiring to be wiser than the others, they became fools. Had I been at liberty and in this situation, such a dialogue and approach would have encouraged me to continue aborting human fetuses. If I occasionally referred a woman who had doubts about abortion to the trusted pro-lifers, I would have considered it a necessary business expense, an insurance policy which garnered me increased security—physical and job security—but also better public relations, because the corrupted "pro-life" pastors would work to isolate and suppress their more radical brothers and sisters.

I would have found such an accommodating method completely ineffective in changing my mind, no matter how flattering I would be to the pastors and church leaders, no matter how much I hung on every word they said and repeated to them that this was "the highlight of my month" as my colleague had said to them, probably laughing behind his hand, he the humane killer. My colleague meant it for evil, but God meant that it never should have happened. How these pastors thought they could effect change in my colleague by endless dialogue and handholding is amazing!

On the other hand, *my* experiences of the past few years completely reversed the trend of my long-term thoughts. Here I have been encountered by a group of people committed to protecting pre-born humans and treating them as if they were actual persons. When I found that I had nothing to do but adapt to this life—barring the remote chance of escape—I came to admire my captors. They put on a great performance, but it was more than show. Here I was, locked up, and a considerable

amount of my liquid assets had been confiscated. And these two facts, more than anything, began to inveigh upon me the possibility that I might have been wrong. I remember what the spokesman for the Tribunal said, that the trial was not so much about determining my guilt—I had revealed that by admitting I was an abortion doctor—as it was about *convincing* me of my guilt. I was, like many educated men and women of my generation, unschooled in absolutes, and not only this, but schooled in hostility against them. And it was my "education" and the concomitant comfort, wealth, and prestige which insulated me from the realities of pain, deprivation, humiliation, and helplessness which would argue against my education. Now, simply, a power had utterly defeated me and, oddly, left me alive and healthy to contemplate my loss.

I did not process all this wholly by intellect. But it began one night about three years ago toward the end of a meditation that "If they believe this so much, maybe there is truth to it." I was humiliated and brought to nothing. My pride was crushed. I was given a death sentence, and in clemency the sentence was suspended. I was given the best of diet and medical treatment.

More about that. When I came here, I began to notice a pain in one of my legs. Upon examination, and after tests, an oncologist discovered that I had a serious cancer. The cancer was treated aggressively and now is in remission. The people who held me captive respected me as a human being. Strange as it may seem, what the pro-choice leaders would say is cruel—the abduction and incarceration—was in fact *love*, was in fact *kindness*. They loved me enough to stop me from harming others and myself.

Once I began seeing this, I understood that these people also believe in supporting women for whom pregnancy creates negative pressure. My determination to adhere to autonomy in the moral realm had blinded me to the reality that abortion harms women and is a form of slavery. I blinded myself to the truth that those who care for the rights and lives of "fetuses" truly care the same for their mothers. It had become convenient to attack them on this point because our presumption was that abortion was necessary, and anything that restricted it was bad for "women." It was a closed circle which cut women out—real women and their needs. Our arguments never were logical, but

we knew that the public did not think logically. As I said, good logic did not help the pro-life people when their lives denied their logic. This might not apply to every abortion practitioner, but for me, it was the force of action that affirmed the humanity of pre-born humans—action modified and seasoned by mercy.

Extending that for transforming the culture, words alone were worse than useless, because they gave mainstream pro-lifers a false sense of accomplishment. Once a year, a few (not many at all in comparison to their numbers) painted words on placards, got on TV, and afterward went home believing they had done their jobs. Meanwhile, we kept killing children. Really stopping us would have made the marchers "feel uncomfortable." It would have been too expensive. The Sterne organization was an exception. Their wordlessness became an asset, because it allowed them to operate invisibly for a long while, until recently.

Eleven days ago—a Monday morning—the U.S. government dropped several mega-bombs in western Oregon. Do not believe press reports about this being a meteor and no casualties. They were bombs targeting several hundred men, women, and children who were associated with an organization named the Chinook Assembly—the people who arrested me. They lived on a beautiful estate. I knew some of those people killed, and their forfeiture brought me to the breaking point—where I needed to take a side. Their destruction and the unraveling of this organization came because of its attempt to stop the "Octopus," who has killed many abortion providers. This man was the boyfriend of the Telford girl who died at my incompetent hand, and he had targeted me on the day of my arrest. He would have shot me if I had not been snatched away. The world is mysterious and ironic. This organization that lifted me and others away from our miserable lives was mortally wounded by trying to stop others from killing us. Why should I be spared when so many others have died? The world swirls chaotically, and I am calm and acquiescent at the center, watching it all happen around me.

The people who held me have become friends. I've learned to respect them, and they, in turn, see the change in my viewpoints and person. Due to the revelation of their existence and the disruption the bombing produced in their organization, they may

release me from my life sentence. If this happens, I'm not sure what I'll do. I have work here now. I've been seeing patients in remote rural areas and have delivered nearly two dozen babies so far. Isn't this ironic? I quit deliveries years ago because bringing children into the world was so troublesome—getting out of bed at 3:00 a.m.—compared to aborting them on a schedule. But this is my work again, and I love it.

Perhaps I will come see you and the children.

I've been told that you divorced me. I imagine that you have begun a new life for yourself and have forgotten about me. I don't blame you. But I would like to see you anyway, briefly, and maybe there is something I can do for you or the children. Be thinking of what, okay? Please allow me to help. I believe that it will be safe for me, even though Octopus remains at large. I may visit Mr. Telford, the father of the girl who died just before I was whisked away, and ask him to forgive me. After a visit in the U.S., I might return here and continue the practice I have begun. I have learned to love this country, the people, and the land. I have been living for the past year in a fairly inaccessible place between mountains and flat empty plain, and I have learned to worship silence and cool winds. I am no longer kept in a prison cell, but even if I wanted to run away, I couldn't make it out on my own—it's that isolated. This is a forgotten place of the world. However, it will be good to leave for awhile so that I can come back at my choosing. Again, I beg you not to release this letter to the government. And now that I think about it, it should not go to the press either. Not yet.

When I come, I will have a completely new identity.

I am deeply sorry for the pain I have caused you. Don't be angry at the people who took me away from you these past four years. They saved me. I hope that telling my story to you and sharing my thoughts will pull you away from a life of death.

I will try to write again soon. Maybe I'll see you and the children within a month. If I can find a telephone number, I'll call first so as not to give you a heart attack by appearing unexpectedly at the door.

Love to you and Tyler and Alyssa. –Mark

P.S. Please tell the children how much I've missed them! I'll see you soon.

December 29, 2017

To Anselm Sterne

Dear Mr. Sterne,

I am writing to you from South America shortly after my return from the United States, where I visited for about six weeks. I have been told that you will receive this letter, though I do not know where you are. First, I wish to express to you my condolences for the death of many members of your family. I say with the utmost sincerity that I am sorrowful over what has happened to them. Your father was a daring and noble man.

During my stay in the U.S., I saw my ex-wife, Barbara, and most of my children. What happened with them is not terribly pertinent to the purpose of my writing to you, but I will mention that I have hope of seeing them all again, and Barbara has not forbidden this. The reason I am writing is that, in the course of my travel, I encountered a relative of yours, and I wish to pass on to you what I saw and heard. This information should be of interest personally, of course, but also because of the bearing it has on your work.

My travel arrangements involved the typical means—a commercial airplane, taxis, and rented cars. But at one stage when I was leaving the U.S. it was necessary that your friends carry me along, but these people in New Mexico who were supposed to help me in the next leg of my journey, that is, crossing the border south, were not what I expected, nor what you might have guessed. They were what you would call a "ped," but different in that they had broken away from the over-arching group, not only organizationally, but in ethics and methods. They were completely militarized. The leader of this ped was your older sister, Mindy; and one of the co-leaders was a person I hoped to never meet, Thomas Sherman. Sherman, I had thought, would murder me the instant he discovered who I was, but apparently, he had changed from what the reports made him out to be. For you, my story is not the most significant part of this, and so I want now to report to you what I learned, and then I will include what happened to me in the full context.

Keep in mind that I am mostly reporting what I heard directly from your sister and Thomas Sherman, and I will try to include all of the factual information and personal observations they made, even if they don't seem important. I do not understand all of this myself. I have not arranged it all in chronological order.

The criminals who killed Coral Levine and kidnapped Mindy on Mt. St. Helens made a fast getaway once they had seized their quarry. Those criminals that you and Bernardo encountered had only been delayed by a flat tire, otherwise, they would not have been in the area. That you already know. The other criminals traveled northeast and crossed into Canada, and then moved back into the United States in Montana. From there they made their way south and settled on forestland west of Silverton, Colorado. The campground there had been abandoned and was a perfect place to set up for the fall months, the same as they had near Mt. St. Helens. When winter neared, they would run down into Mexico, they thought. Once they arrived at Silverton, they spent days cutting trees for firewood. The elevation where their camp was is 10,000 feet, and it snows even in summer. They had fitted a leg iron to Mindy. The leader of the criminals, whose name was Sedge, kept her as a sexual slave and to perform his cooking and cleaning. Her face was bruised and battered, as Sedge frequently pummeled her into submission. Under this extreme abuse, Mindy buried her feelings of shame and anger and swore to herself, and calmly to Sedge, that she would kill him. When she heard from Sedge the story about the giant meteor falling in western Oregon, she guessed that the government had destroyed the Mollicoat Estate. She believed it was likely that her whole family, or most of them, had perished. In time, as the criminals prepared to migrate to Mexico with the coming of winter, Mindy's desire for retribution faded with the extinguishing of her spirit, and the poison of despair became her food and drink—this is how she put it to me.

Earlier this year, right before the bombing of the Mollicoat Estate, when Thomas Sherman left Stan Timmons at the watch-house in Salt Lake City, Sherman was nervous that Mr. Timmons had known how to find him. He had been moved by Timmons' account of the passing of Beth Telford, but the story

did not fit into the fantasy he had created about her. As he hobbled away, he said, he noticed, or felt, a tension in the air of the neighborhood, as if the whole scene was unnatural. Though he still played the old woman's character, his senses had shifted into a hypersensitive mode, as that of a predator that had just become prey. While he did not think of this with his conscious mind, his animal instincts, which had been sharpened by months of stalking and hiding, warned him to not return to this neighborhood. Consciously, he only thought that if he wished to see Stan Timmons again—and he had not ruled this out—he could easily find him in Vancouver. The feeling he had in Salt Lake, and his conversation with Timmons, confirmed that he needed a shift-up in his mission. After that, his solitary crusade wound down to a halt. With the government protecting the abortion personnel and sites, he would no longer be able to make the "hits" as he had in the past. He wandered around the country and continued his surveillance, but he never could safely get close enough for a strike.

The evening before the bombs dropped on the Mollicoat Estate, your brother Bernardo Armentrout left for a deep caving expedition in New Mexico. Going on the trip had been a sudden decision, because one of the team members had fallen ill, and Bernardo was needed to fill his place. The trip was not a mere adventure because the members of the team actually comprised a ped that was exploring the cave system as a potential hiding place for the Assembly. This cave, which promised to have miles of large, stable caverns and a pure water supply, had only recently been discovered by an Assembly sympathizer, so it was still unknown to the rest of the world. When Bernardo received his notice to evacuate and learned what had happened, he was angry in the extreme about the bombing and decided that he would not leave the country. Rather, he would stay home and fight the GiP as an actual underground soldier. Another brother of yours arrived, via Greyhound bus, at the town where the ped stayed, near the cave—this was Luther. I never got a chance to meet him, but everyone there said that he was confident and mature for his age.

This town is where, as I had been told, I would find a ped that could fly me back across the Mexican border.

Bernardo gathered what equipment and resources he could and the ped settled into that huge system of caves. They were able to acquire automatic weapons, grenades, surface-to-air launchers, rockets, a considerable supply of explosives and electronic communications devices. Out of deep hatred for those who murdered his biological parents and now for those who murdered his adopted family, Bernardo decided to break with the ethos of the Assembly. He and his group would begin a guerilla war, starting with the places of abortion—which he deemed qualified as full military targets.

Along the way, in the course of events, Thomas Sherman happened to witness up close one of Bernardo's attacks on an abortion clinic. The fighting was extreme and violent. Sherman was thrilled and hoped to join the attackers when the gunfight concluded. He grabbed medical scrubs from a nearby supply shop and pretended to be hiding. One of Bernardo's men saw and captured him. Sherman was able to convince them that he was not an abortion doctor, and begged to fight with them.

Shortly afterward, Bernardo's ped heard information about a group of criminals, who, according to ped members, were the ones you called the "brigands." The group was encamped in the Silverton area and the ped organized to raid them. The fighting was fierce and many of the brigands were killed. Bernardo and, sadly, Luther, also were killed during the attack. (Luther was not allowed to be in the combat, but he fell from an observation point on a cliff face.) There were few other casualties within the ped, but ten brigands were captured or else surrendered. Four others, including Sedge, took Mindy and retreated up into the icy mountains away from the fighting and noise. Members of the ped followed them. The brigands took up positions and exchanged fire with the ped fighters who had pursued them. When she saw her chance, Mindy took a knife and killed Sedge. (From watching her briefly narrate this, I think that it was not a "clean" kill.) She then took his rifle and looked it over carefully to see how it worked. Then from her position, she shot two other brigands, and the last one ran. Since she was chained, she sat and waited for ped fighters to arrive. When Mindy heard about the deaths of her brothers, she cried uncontrollably. Thomas Sherman was pleased to find your sister alive, but saw that she

was changed—was almost unrecognizable to him. That night, after ped members brought the brigand prisoners to their own quarters near Durango, Sherman slipped among the uninjured prisoners, who were bound and gagged, and cut their throats.

Since Bernardo was dead, Mindy assumed command of the ped the next day and said that they would never kill prisoners again. The majority of the ped was willing to follow her, and some of the members left. Mindy told the remaining group that she had only two more things to do in her life. One was to look for her husband in the North Cascades, which she did soon afterward with Sherman and a few others; but she did not find him. After the search, there was another thing which apparently she had been planning for some time. She never mentioned in my presence what it was, though they were in the thick of intense preparation all around me when I left.

It was your sister, Mindy, who convinced Sherman not to kill me. That is a separate story all to itself—about how she argued that I had changed, and how this nearly broke into violence between Sherman and the other ped members—but again, your family saved my life. The ped transported me across the U.S./Mexican border and safely on my way south.

All of the above, except for my own observations and direct experience with the ped, transpired within the past five months and before I came to the town in New Mexico. After my trip, I arrived here in time to celebrate Christmas with friends, and before the cold winter settled into North America.

I hope this information helps you. I know that all of it isn't news that you welcome, but I am sure you want to know it anyway. Again, my deepest condolences. Thank you for who you are. I hope we can meet in better circumstances than we did before—when you were my "prosecutor." I know you are busy, but come see me in my mountains if you ever have a chance.

Sincerely,

Mark Ponder

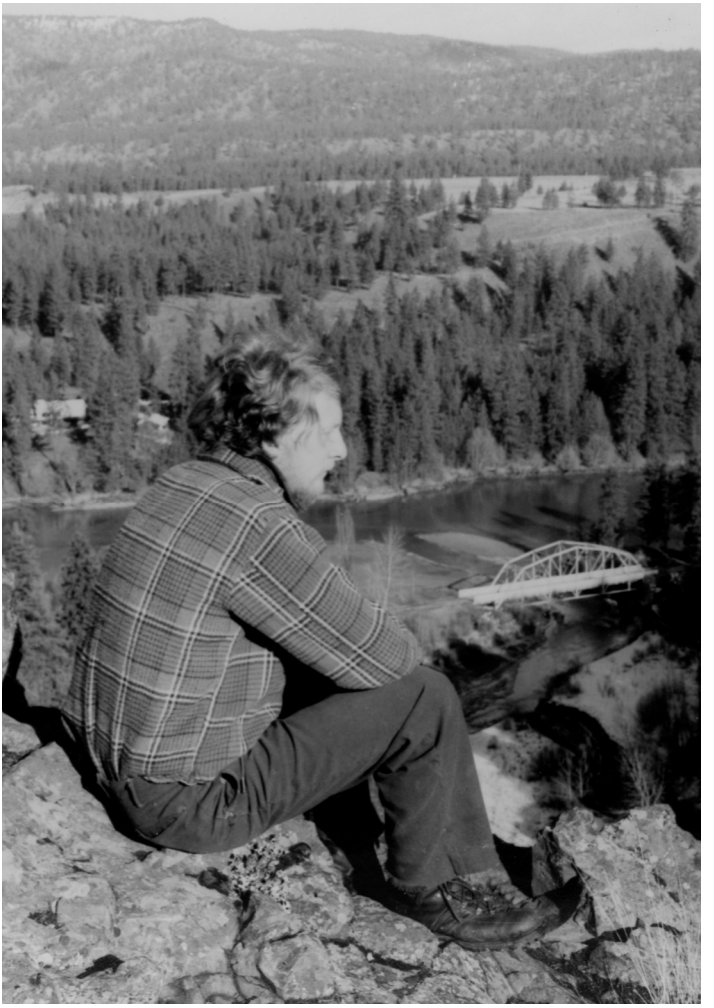
**Nieves penitentes** ***14,000 feet high in the Chilean Andes.***
PHOTO BY PRISCILLA HUNT

The story of **UNIVERSAL MAN** begins with:

Part One, ***Graceful Runner***

and Part Two, ***The Chinook Assembly***

***In an abandoned house along the railroad tracks in Swannanoa, NC.***



***Hunt in eastern Washington in January 1973.***
PHOTO BY MARILYN